AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONCEPTUAL AND PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF THE COMPASSION CYCLE AND RELATED ELEMENTS OF SELF-AWARENESS AND EMPATHY AT THE VALLEY FELLOWSHIP SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

A Practical Research Project

presented to

the Faculty of

Claremont School of Theology

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

by

Baron A. Sovory

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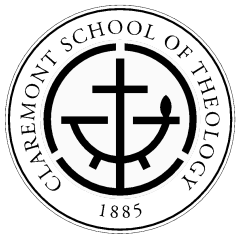

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ABSTRACT

Compassion, Self Awareness, and Empathy at the Valley Fellowship SDA Church

by

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Compassion is a foundational virtue in Christian life, rooted in the nature of a compassionate God and exemplified in the life of Jesus Christ. His actions on earth serve as the model for those who seek to follow His example—demonstrating compassion toward themselves, extending care to others, and embracing the divine source of compassion. This cycle—receiving compassion from God, cultivating self-compassion, and extending it to others—creates the fertile ground for a loving and transformative community.

Compassion differs from empathy, sympathy, or pity in its relational posture, language, and, most importantly, the intentional decision to act on behalf of those who suffer. This study examines biblical teachings on compassion from both the Old and New Testaments while incorporating research on compassion and its practical application. Key frameworks include the work of Dr. Frank Rogers on compassionate practice, self-compassion assessments developed by Dr. Kristin Neff, and measures of compassion for self and others by Dr. Stanley Stendhal.

This research is conducted within the context of Valley Fellowship Seventh-day Adventist Church to assess personal and corporate opportunities for growth in compassion. By fostering greater awareness of compassion's role in individual and communal life, this study seeks to identify pathways for meaningful impact within the church and beyond. Results indicated that compassion from God, and compassion for others are areas of growth and deeper study to fully develop the full benefits of compassion on a personal and corporate level.

Dedication

To all who strive to cultivate and embody compassion and empathy for the well-being of others—may you also remember to extend this priceless gift to yourself, for you are just as worthy.

— Baron

Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to many who have played a role—both overtly and behind the scenes—in shaping my life and bringing me to this moment.

To my parents, Pastor Allen and Rosalyn Sovory: Thank you for being living examples of a spiritual life and for your unwavering encouragement and support in more ways than I can count. I am beyond blessed to call you Mom and Dad. I love you both.

To my wife, Amy: Your steadfast love, prayers, and belief in me have carried me through my toughest days. Thank you for being my greatest supporter, my rock when I was weak, and my constant source of encouragement. I thank God for you, and I love you deeply.

To my daughters, Joelle and Solange: I am so proud of the young women you are becoming. Know that I love you both more than words can express.

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To my dearest friends, your encouragement, prayers, and friendship have meant the world to me. Achievement in any endeavor does not happen alone, but in community. To my colleagues who have walked this path before me and those who have inspired and supported me along the way—my heartfelt gratitude goes to you as well.

To my church family, Valley Fellowship: Your support and gift of focused time to complete this work have been invaluable. You are an incredible community, and it is an honor to serve you.

To those who, in many ways, have taught me the meaning of compassion—through both joyful and challenging experiences—you have shaped my growth, and for that, I am truly thankful.

Dr. Lincoln E. Galloway and Dr. Frank A. Rogers, thank you for pouring your time and wisdom into me. I am filled with gratitude for your willingness to guide me through this part of my journey.

And above all, to God: Thank You for Your boundless compassion, Your unwavering presence, and for never giving up on me.

With gratitude,

Baron

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If it is not tempered by compassion, and empathy, reason can lead men and women into a moral void.

~Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*

Introduction

Compassion in Crisis

I have been a Christian my entire life and my expectation and assumption was that all Christians are compassionate people. As I grew older, I discovered that many are compassion adjacent, meaning that they believe they are being compassionate but upon closer examination and research, their behavior was more consistent with pity and sympathy, which I will cover in some detail later in this paper. I discovered compassion and its closely associated action of empathy and that there are benefits not only spiritually but emotionally and physically as well. It became clear at some point in my Christian experience that everyone who calls themselves Christians did not always respond to life's many challenges with compassion, including myself. I have come to learn that compassion is a behavior I can cultivate and grow within myself and with others. To be fair, none of us is perfect, and we all have bad moments or days and we are not always at our best, we all need grace. At times, a comment or response that lacks compassion can happen to all of us, and does. Through our humanness, our good days and our bad, there is still a palpable lack of compassion that some express toward others and toward themselves and even toward God for many various reasons, which is why the understanding of how we can become more compassionate in all areas of life is critical.

When it comes to the topic of compassion, most of us will readily agree that we find it easier to be compassionate and loving toward those persons we know and with whom we find common ground, including gender, religious affiliation, cultural and racial background, economic status, health condition and even sports teams. We are wired to be open and connect with those that we agree with most, do not offend our sense of safety and share our values.

Making assumptions is easy, but assumptions can lead us to false conclusions, and compassionate behavior toward self and others is where I want to focus. First, we generally assume that we as humans do care for others and value others for who they are in a compassionate way. Second, we assume that we take the time to appreciate the struggles of others and lift up those who do not have opportunities to move up in life, and make sure that the least of society are valued and not forgotten. As stated previously, the truth is that we often incorrectly label compassion when faced with pity, or even the need for empathy. And as I have dug further into the subject of compassion, the reality is grimmer than I initially thought. Compassion is declining. Consider this, evidence from hospitals to college campuses indicate that being compassionate to, self, and others is in crisis.[1] There are signs all around the world and even in our local communities that suggest that compassion is in crisis. We observe the proliferation of war throughout the world that leaves countless dead as well as multiple families torn apart all for the sake of valuing one idea or possessing land. We also witness the rise of hate speech and of violence at schools, churches, work spaces, and many places in between. All of these developments prompt us to inquire about the role of compassion in the human heart, and in our institutions.

We observe a lack of compassion everywhere, and there is evidence that supports the assertion that compassion is not only in decline; it is in crisis. Research done by Dignity Health discovered that half of Americans believe that society is not compassionate, and does not place a high value on compassion at all.[2] In fact there is ongoing evidence that Americans are becoming more focused on themselves and less on others. Though the proliferation of phones serves as a

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[1] Stephen Trzeciak, Anthony Mazzarelli, and Cory Booker, *Compassionomics: The Revolutionary Scientific Evidence That Caring Makes a Difference* (Pensacola, FL: Studer Group, 2019), 3, 11.
[2] "Americans Rate Kindness as Top Factor in Care," Dignity Health, November 13, 2013, https://www.dignityhealth.org/about-us/press-center/press-releases/majority-of-americans-rate-kindness.

valuable tool to remain in contact with people, and accomplish many helpful and meaningful tasks, it too, has contributed to greater focus on self, increased isolation, and even decreased self-esteem among young people (although not limited to this age demographic alone).[3] This is why I was drawn to the topic of compassion not only personally but for the church community I serve, and the community at large. I wanted to explore if a focus on the subject and practices of compassion could increase awareness, and even bring about change in the ways in which members interact with others. This project is geared towards members of the Valley Fellowship Seventh Day Adventist Church in Rialto, California in order to bring to light the importance of compassion and the ways it may impact their self-awareness, their view of God and God's compassion and their compassion towards themselves and others, and finally their service in the world.

This project takes at its starting premise that the source of compassion is God. This is a tremendous gift from God, to each of us, and one we should share with others. The project will also draw on the Bible and scriptures that invite us to love God, and to love others such as Matthew 22:37-40[4].[5] The Gospel of Matthew records a version of the golden rule: "So in everything, do to others what you have them do to you."(Matthew 7:12).[6] We are also invited to a life of compassion as recorded in 1 Peter 3:8 (NIV) with "Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble."[7] Jesus is the greatest example of this way of living and caring for others, and if we are to lead ourselves well, and care for others well, compassion is an essential ingredient to a healthy spiritual life.

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[3] Alvian Pradana Ambarita and T. Riza Zarzani, "Social Media-Induced Cyber Bullying Behaviour Affecting Teenagers," *International Journal of Sociology and Law* 1, no. 2 (May 2024), 43.
[4] All biblical quotes are from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise indicated.
[5] Matthew 22:37-40.
[6] Matthew 7:12.
[7] 1 Peter 3:8.

This project on compassion is designed as a series of presentations, discussions, and opportunities for personal reflection to have participants from the Valley Fellowship SDA Church engage the concept of compassion using theoretical, theological, and biblical resources to discern how compassion impacts their spiritual life, self-awareness, and service in the world.

Context

I am currently the pastor of the Valley Fellowship SDA church; a predominantly African American Seventh-day Adventist congregation located in Rialto, California. The congregation has existed for fifty-one years and has a current membership of over 700 on the books and an active attendance of 50-75 per sabbath. The church has experienced a decline in its membership within the past five years from 2019-2024, which included the season of the pandemic, however the current attendance has stabilized to the aforementioned 50-75 per week. Recently the church has experienced internal conflicts within a few departments that have created challenges with membership retention and service to the church which is needed. Furthermore, there have been conflicts in the past that have resulted in membership loss; a dangerous trend that requires reflection by current members and leaders. It is my hope that this series on the topic of compassion will encourage future church growth and personal growth to the members who participate.

As a minister in the Seventh-day Adventist church, I have lived in the ever-evolving space of church leadership and church dynamics. My interest has grown in trying to understand the importance of compassion in ministry, and more specifically, its impact on leadership and the self-awareness of members of a congregation, so that members may be always mindful of how they show up in the world. This topic has taken on greater meaning for me during my doctoral studies at Claremont School of Theology. How each person shows up makes a difference in how

others experience the church and a reflection of their personal relationship with God. Each person has their own particular life challenges, and how each person deals with them can have an impact on the way they see God, and their future.

Justification

The current state of the church which has plateaued in church attendance, and conversations with members about difficulty moving through various life transitions is evidence that an intentional conversation about compassion may support healthy personal growth within the membership. Hopefully, this work on compassion can lead to increased compassion in leadership, improved intentional spiritual care, and healthier self-awareness that can support healing of current and past hurt within the church member and the church. Spiritual and personal growth are good ideas, but tools are needed to learn how to be compassionate to yourself and others. The long-term goal is to have a congregation that is more compassionate in its leadership, and service, and overall to raise the spiritual experience of each member. This in turn will lead to a more healthy church, with members who are more self-aware; who practice the art of self-compassion; who experience healing, and who in turn offer compassion to others.

For those that are leaders or potential leaders at the church, my hope is that this project will equip them with knowledge about the key subject of this project and improve their leadership to the church and perhaps beyond through the development of a framework of compassion and self-awareness that will assist their leadership development. Furthermore, the opportunity for personal growth and development can benefit participants beyond the walls of the church and have an impact on other areas of life.

Definitions, and Limitations

The project was conducted with the members of the Valley Fellowship SDA Church in Rialto, California. It focused on developing an understanding of compassion presented in and from experts, theological and biblical writings along with researchers in the field of compassion. There were three sessions, and data was collected from people's self-reporting on feedback forms, and discussions. It is my hope that the impact of this methodology and assessment will be used in broader contexts in the years to come

Project Outline

Chapter One:

In chapter one I present a theoretical framework of the compassion cycle, definitions of compassion, empathy, and self-awareness while considering various perspectives of compassion and the source of compassion.

Chapter Two:

This chapter offers discussion on theological and biblical foundations of compassion

Chapter Three:

In chapter three I describe the research methodology I used and the instruments utilized for data collection processes and shared with participants.

Chapter Four:

This chapter presents results and findings from the participants of the project.

Chapter Five:

Chapter five shares conclusions and recommendations for potential future research in the future.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Compassion insists that we abandon focusing solely on ourselves and acknowledge that our lives, though seemingly independent, are in fact impacted by the people and the communities that surround us. In the economy of compassion, others are just as important as the self. We will discuss the value of self-compassion later in this paper.

Social psychology has conducted research on the behavior of groups of people and how they respond to troubling situations. One such situation is the "bystander effect" which was first discovered by John Darley and Latane Bibb and defined as "the phenomenon in which the presence of people (i.e., bystanders) influences an individual's likelihood of helping a person in an emergency situation. Their research indicated that as the number of people who are present in an emergency situation increases, the less likely it is that any single individual will help someone in need."[8] Further research has discovered what is called the diffusion of responsibility. This is defined as the idea that the presence of others changes the behavior of the individual by making them feel less responsible for the consequences of their actions. Frederike Byer et al have noted that "The diffusion of responsibility concept has great social, political and moral importance, because it might constitute a form of moral disengagement purported to explain inhumane actions."[9] This concept of diffusion of responsibility, moral disengagement, and self-efficacy is covered in the writings of Dr. Albert Bandura.[10] In other words, the more focused we become on

[8] Jack Cieciura, "A Summary of the Bystander Effect: Historical Development and Relevance in the Digital Age," *Inquiries Journal* 8, no. 11 (2016): 1, http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1493.

[9] Frederike Beyer et al., "Beyond Self-Serving Bias: Diffusion of Responsibility Reduces Sense of Agency and Outcome Monitoring," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 12, no. 1 (December 1, 2016): 139, https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsw160.

[10] Albert Bandura, "Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3, no. 3 (August 1999): 194-195, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0303_3.

ourselves as humans, the more we think that the issues of society are the issues of others and not ours.

There is some good news however, researchers have discovered that being compassionate improves our health and overall well-being.[11] This is a ray of sunshine that presents the possibility of not only caring for others and ourselves in a better way, but also improving our overall health and well being. The work of compassion can be learned with intention and consistency, and the benefits are experienced on a personal and corporate level. Compassionate behavior can decelerate some of the interpersonal crises we see all around us if we are willing to change the one entity we have control over, namely, ourselves.

There are frameworks and practices that have been developed over the years that seek to expand a person's compassion and some will be utilized in this study. It is through thorough exposure to these guides that I developed my own framework, The Compassion Cycle. I have digested meaningful parts of compassion practices from practitioners, such as Karen Armstrong's *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, Dr. Kristen Neff's work, *Self Compassion: The Power of Being Kind to Yourself*, and Dr. Frank Rogers Jr.'s work in *Compassion in Practice: The Way of Jesus*. These writers and researchers have had a tremendous impact on my perspective and my emerging development and understanding of compassion and to them I owe a great deal of thanks and appreciation.

The Compassion Cycle

The compassion cycle is a framework that describes the process of how compassion moves from the source to humanity, and directs us back to the source, God. We first receive Compassion from God. This is an awareness by humanity that God is the sacred source of

[11] Matthew R. Thomas et al., "How Do Distress and Well-Being Relate to Medical Student Empathy? A Multicenter Study," *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 22, no. 2 (January 9, 2007),177–83.

compassion manifested in unconditional love to us, as well as God's care, mercy, and forgiveness. When we fully receive God's unconditional love and compassion, we apply this compassion to ourselves, (self-compassion), giving us the space to forgive ourselves and release the weight of guilt and shame. These actions of self-compassion help to create the space and capacity to extend compassion to others. When individuals extend compassion to others, it can further awaken in the recipients of human compassion, an openness to seek and to experience divine compassion and on and on the cycle goes and grows. The compassion cycle that I envision is demonstrated in the cycle shown below:

Compassion Cycle

1. I receive Compassion from the divine in the form of grace, care, mercy, or forgiveness.,
2. Having received divine compassion, I then apply compassion to myself, forgiving myself, and no longer punishing myself for the past that created a disconnect from the divine. At this point, I become aware of being made right with God and also with myself.
3. Having received compassion from God, and applying compassion to myself, I can then share it freely with others. This brings healing to relationships in different areas of my life such as family, work, church, and the wider society.
4. Having received compassion from God, and applying compassion to myself, and sharing it with others, those who have received compassion are positioned to receive compassion from God; to express compassion toward self, and to extend compassion to others.

Figure 1: The Compassion Cycle

Compassion as a Goal

The need for compassion within my local church community and the communities that I live in will always be in demand. Not that they are any worse that other communities, they are not, but life is difficult and the hand and actions of the compassionate can make all the difference. My burden for my local congregation is that the impact is profound and life giving. It is my desire that as we embrace the compassion and to what extent is possible the compassion cycle of receiving God's unconditional and limitless compassion into our lives, that we heal the wounds of our heart and gain strength to spread compassion to others and that the cycle begins for them and spreads to the next person.

The theological and spiritual context is that God requires of us: mercy, justice, and humility (Micah 6:8). This text is a core source of my theology of compassion. When- we become fully engaged in these three practices, we become better able to understand and respond

to the demands of self-compassion, and compassion towards others. I have a deep desire to see and be a part of restorative justice and healing for all people. I desire to embody mercy in the way I conduct myself as a pastor, a husband, father, and friend. I want to always remain humble in my interactions with other humans because I am aware that we are all God's wonderful creation and all members of the family of God.

What is compassion?

"According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word compassion stems from the Latin *compati*, meaning to suffer with."[12] In his book *Living Compassion,* Andrew Dreitcer describes compassion as "the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering."[13] Dr. Frank Rogers in his book, *Compassion in Practice*, shares his compelling definition as "simply being moved in our depths by others' experiences and responding in a way that intends either to ease their suffering or promote their flourishing."[14] Karen Armstrong, another leading voice on compassion, provides an even more expansive definition when she presents compassion as "an attitude of principled, consistent altruism."[15] Dreitcer, Rogers, and Armstrong place an emphasis on three things. First, based on what I am capable of, I am moved internally to make a plan to take action. For compassion to work we must become aware of the need for action and that begins with my inner self, a connection of heart, mind, soul, to take a step and become uncomfortable with the discomfort another person is experiencing, so much so that I am moved to act. My mindset shifts to responding compassionately and my actions work in unison and I use it to help others. Based on the

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[12] Clara Strauss et al., "What Is Compassion and How Can We Measure It? A Review of Definitions and Measures," *Clinical Psychology Review* 47 (July 2016): 15–27, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2016.05.004.
[13] Andrew Dreitcer, *Living Compassion: Loving like Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2017), 19.
[14]Frank Rogers, *Compassion in Practice: The Way of Jesus* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2016), 30.
[15]Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (New York, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 10.

definitions above, I can conclude that compassionate actions cannot even begin without an internal movement and desire that rises up. Second, compassion is easing the suffering of another. Put another way, I want to reduce the pain you are experiencing with energy and action that comes from me, I enter into a space of suffering WITH you. Third, the end result leaves the other in a better position; a place where healing, wholeness, strength can begin. Compassionate action has the goal of leaving the other person in better condition than when they were first encountered. This is the foundation of compassionate behavior and action. It is much more than simply observing hurt and investigating the possible causes why the suffering exists, it is taking action to help the one who is suffering.

The definitions above present the foundational behaviors and expected outcomes of compassionate actions, but as scripture states, we all "fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3;23) In contrast to the ideals and definitions of compassion, it is observed in the behavior of some that there is sometimes a complacency and even disdain toward caring for the marginalized in society. This is sometimes manifested in many ways that humans can harm others with words, exclusivity, abuse, and even civil and government policy. Systems at times, though well intentioned in many if not most cases can at times do more harm than good. Admittedly these issues are complex and require coordination of many on multiple levels, and at times come with a heavy cost, which is why compassion on a personal level is so valuable. In the midst of challenging systems and perhaps government policy, we can still bring a caring touch to those suffering the most. Examples of this are the generous donations of churches and members who may donate clothing, or provide the funds to purchase goods and food for those who need it most. There are also professionals who offer their services and support in the areas of social

work, psychology, counseling, and spiritual work for reduced rates and at times for free. I have personally been a part of these communities that offer all of these services and the lives that this compassionate action improves has been seen. The choice to be compassionate if free, the action of compassion will cost time, and perhaps some money, but the reward can be priceless.

Compassion: Beyond Pity, Sympathy and Empathy

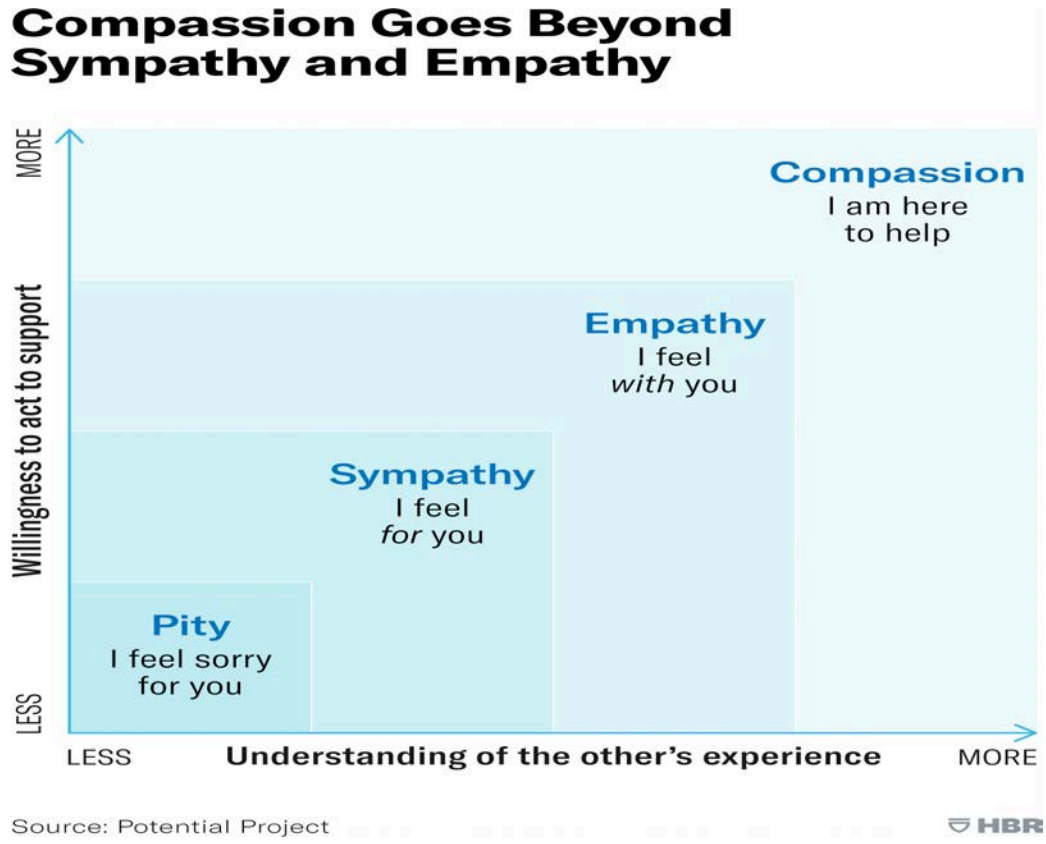

Figure 2: Visual differentiating compassion from pity, sympathy and empathy.

Empathy

Empathy is closely related to compassion but is distinctly different. The American Psychology Association defines empathy as "understanding a person from their frame of reference rather than one's own, or vicariously experiencing that person's feelings, perceptions,

and thoughts. Empathy does not, of itself, entail motivation to be of assistance, although it may turn into sympathy or personal distress, which may result in action." [16] Empathy allows you to enter into the experience of another vicariously and brings to a place where you can relate or understand internally where another person is. There are times when empathy is the most appropriate action one can take, and if that all a person can do or is the best given the circumstance, by all means be present and supportive from an empathetic posture.

It is important, however, to distinguish the difference between being compassionate and being empathetic as they are often conflated with one another and it is easy to believe that we are being compassionate when the behavior is more consistent with being empathetic. While there is a place for the empathetic response and deeply understanding the perspective of another, empathy stops at the door of action and does not enter. Empathy moves us closer to the mindset that communicates, your burden is my burden. The diagram shown in Figure 2 demonstrates not only the difference between empathy and compassion, but two other common emotions that people often confuse with one another. To be clear, empathy is not "bad" per se, the point in refining the difference is to distinguish the characteristics of both postures of relating to one another. Both empathy and compassion hold value in and of themselves and can be healing and supportive.

Pity and Sympathy

The emotions and responses of sympathy and pity are often considered branches of the same tree; and they are not interchangeable terms. Figure 2 makes the differences clear. Hougaard insists that pity, and sympathy are the emotional responses that demand little

[16] *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, s.v. "empathy," last modified November 15, 2023, https://dictionary.apa.org/empathy.

understanding of another's plight, and furthermore do nothing to help. The essence of his argument is that pity and sympathy keep the sufferer at a distance from you and create a social hierarchy that sees you as higher as a person and in a favorable and better position in life. The image is the authority and the subject that communicates " I feel sorry FOR you" and" feel FOR you" is not an invitation to be in community but a line between me and thee. Hougaard further contrasts this idea with the responses of empathy and compassion where the idea of "withness" is conveyed by the words "I feel with you, and I am here to help."[17] The "withness" of empathy and compassion distinguish these responses and behaviors as ideal in supporting people through challenges and bringing about the best in them or their situation. I wholeheartedly agree. The response of "I feel with you" brings the sufferer in close emotional proximity. The empathetic person responds to the gravity of the moment and will not let the sufferer stand alone. Empathy enters into the space of the hurting willingly and understands the pain of the hurting and stays with them. The *I am with you* posture of empathy is powerful for both who enter into its space. We encounter the empathetic God in the words spoken to Joshua, "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."(Joshua 1:9); and the empathetic and comforting words of Psalm 23 which state, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." However, the compassionate response takes it even further." Empathy has a place, and has value, but *Compassion* brings the emotional depth of empathy, and adds the willingness to bring the pain to its end. Compassion is arguably the most challenging because it demands action. One cannot be compassionate and not extend a hand of support or help.

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[17]Rasmus Hougaard, Jacqueline Carter, and Marissa Afton, "Connect with Empathy, but Lead with Compassion," Harvard Business Review, December 23, 2021, https://hbr.org/2021/12/connect-with-empathy-but-lead-with-compassion.

Figure 2 uses common language in response to the needs of other people and gives helpful labels that underscore the difference between empathy and compassion while adding a couple of other common terms that can be conflated with compassion. *Pity* communicates "I feel sorry for you." "When we experience pity, we have little willingness to act and little understanding of another's experience. We simply feel sorry for them."[18] There is a distance that is kept between the sufferer and the other invoking a feeling of sitting high and looking low. A pity response keeps one's hands clean and leaves the sufferer as he or she found them suffering. *Sympathy* says: "I feel for you." This response of feeling for someone is marginally better than a pity response, however it maintains the same distance. There is no desire to help or inconvenience one's self in the sympathetic response. It is as if the person is saying, better you than me, and I am so glad it's you! " We often will say to those grieving "I am sorry for your loss" as a way of conveying an awareness that a loss has occurred, but upon deeper examination, the words can unintentionally create an emotional distance between you and the hearer. You lost something, but I did not. Though intended to be an empathetic and perhaps a compassionate response this response does not embrace the hurting, it merely acknowledges its presence. A greater awareness of this was created in my study of compassion and empathy, and greater self awareness can create an alignment with my internal desire to convey compassion and the words I use.

[18] Rasmus Hougaard, Jacqueline Carter, and Marissa Afton, "Connect with Empathy, but Lead with Compassion," Harvard Business Review, December 23, 2021, https://hbr.org/2021/12/connect-with-empathy-but-lead-with-compassion.

Compassion from a Buddhist Perspective

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist, sometimes referred to as the "father of mindfulness" has much to teach in the work of compassion. He indicates that in the Buddhist tradition there is what is known as the four *immeasurables*. "They are called Immeasurable, because if you practice them, they will grow every day until they embrace the whole world. You will become happier and those around you will become happier, also."[19] These *immeasurables* provide a helpful framework for us to consider in the study of compassion. The first is Equanimity, described best as mental calmness, composure, and evenness of temper, especially in difficult situations that are beginning to spiral out of control. The second immeasurable is sympathetic joy. Jack Kornfield describes this as "the ability to feel joy in the happiness of others. . . True shared joy is joy in being, the aliveness, it is an openhearted celebration of our life with one another. Shared joy takes delight in the success and happiness of all. It wishes that their and our happiness may increase."[20] Feeling genuine joy for another person is part of the community of believers, family, friends, and any community of people. When a person experiences success and it is shared with others there should be happiness for their moment that reaches the heart level. The third immeasurable is called loving kindness. Author SK Aung offers this compelling thought on the subject of loving kindness and defines it as "acting with compassion toward all sentient beings, with an awareness and appreciation of the natural world."[21]

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[19] Thich Nhat Hanh in January 1997, "Dharma Talk: The Four Immeasurable Minds – the Mindfulness Bell," Parallax Press, April 23, 2024.

[20] Jack Kornfield, *Bringing Home the Dharma: Awakening Right Where You Are* (Boston, New York: Shambhala ; Distributed by Random House, Inc, 2012), 35.

[21] Aung SK;, "Loving Kindness: The Essential Buddhist Contribution to Primary Care," Humane health care international, April 1996.

IMMEASURABLE	NEAR ENEMY	FAR ENEMY
Equanimity	Indifference	Hatred
Loving Kindness	Sentimentality	Ill Will
Compassion	Pity	Cruelty
Sympathetic Joy	Hypocrisy	Jealousy

Figure 3:The four immeasurables derived from Buddhist teaching. From "Understanding the Four Immeasurables and Their Near and Far Enemies"

This definition brings to the forefront the topic of compassion and how compassion impacts how a person shows up in the world. The final of the immeasurables is compassion which described above is the desire to remove or alleviate the suffering of another. This focus on immeasurables presents us with an important dimension to our study on compassion because we are also introduced to the near and far enemies of these immeasurables.

It is worth noting each of the near enemies so that they are not confused with the real thing. The near enemy is a state of mind that appears similar to the desired state – hence it is referred to as "near" but it actually undermines it, which is why it is an "enemy." Near enemies are often greater threats than far enemies because they are more difficult to recognize. For example, with the immeasurable "equanimity" – the near enemy is indifference; for loving kindness it is sentimentality; regarding sympathetic joy, it is hypocrisy; and the near enemy of

compassion is pity.[22] For the purpose of this study, it is helpful to note that we do not want to confuse compassion with pity, its near enemy.

Brene Brown expresses her perspective by saying, "There's nothing worse than feeling pitied, and we have the research to show us why it feels so isolating. Pity involves four elements: a belief that the suffering person is inferior; a passive, self-focused reaction that does not include providing help; a desire to maintain emotional distance; and avoidance of sharing in the other person's suffering."[23] I deeply resonate with Brown's assertion on pity and its distancing from the person who needs help. "Pity sees them as different from ourselves. It sets up a separation between ourselves and others, a sense of distance and remoteness from the suffering of others that is affirming and gratifying to the self. Compassion, on the other hand, recognizes the suffering of another as a reflection of our own pain; 'I understand this; I suffer in the same way.' It is empathetic, a mutual connection with the pain and sorrow of life. Compassion is shared suffering."[24]

It is within this space that we see the deep connection between empathy and compassion and how they work together. Compassion is expressed through what I would describe as "withness" or a willingness to be present with another person in the midst of suffering. Empathy is a tool of the compassionate person though differing from compassion itself. This brings to mind a phrase used commonly that can be seen as being empathetic, but may be more sympathetic when it is said, "Let me pray for you." At first glance, the phrase appears as a kind gesture toward a hurting soul. However, now that we have clearer definitions and are also exposed to the language of compassion and empathy, perhaps a better way to convey the desire

[22] Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience* (New York: Random House, 2021), 119.
[23] Brown, 120.
[24] Ibid, 120.

to support those in need of prayer, is to say: “Can I pray *with* you?” This implies exactly what it sounds like. You are not alone. I am here to pray with you. This is not only connecting language for the hearer but for the one that is seeking to help. What we say matters, our willingness to be present matters, and what we do matter. Compassion not only impacts the way we act, but it impacts the way we speak.

In an ever-evolving world that appears more isolated and distanced from one another, the idea that we can fight off the near enemy of compassion, and lean into the heart of empathy by saying “I feel with you”, combined with the action of compassion by asking, “How can I help you?” It seems plausible that the church and the world become a better and more compassionate and empathetic place for all.

Self-Compassion and Self-Awareness

I will take a moment to speak of self-compassion and self-awareness and its vital role in a healthy thriving spiritual life. Being compassionate to ourselves is essential for maintaining mental and emotional well-being. Many hold themselves to high and perhaps unrealistic standards. When they are not reached it can lead some to criticize their mistakes harshly. Cultivating self-compassion involves learning to treat ourselves with the same kindness and understanding that we would offer a friend in need. We cannot heal and be compassionate to others fully, unless we are first compassionate to ourselves.

Once self compassion becomes an acknowledged need, we can try different practices that are meaningful to us. One foundational principle is to adjust the way we speak to ourselves. The conversations within our minds can at times be negative, and self-critical often leaving us in a worse place than when we began.

Dr. Shad Helmstetter researched to importance of what we say to ourselves and identified five levels that are common: Level 1, which he calls "the level of negative acceptance . . . and is characterized with phrases like "I can't" . . . or "if I only could" or "I wish I could'."[25] Level 2, the level of recognition and need to change is reflected with the words of "I need to" or "I should."[26] Level three, according to Helmstetter, is a level of not only acknowledging but taking action and he explains it this way, "In this level, you recognize the need to change, but you also make the decision to do something about it and you state the decision in the present tense as though the change has already taken place." An example is saying, "I no longer have a problem dealing with people at work."[27] Level four , the "I am" stage is the most efficacious level of positive self-talk, the author expresses this in writing, "level four is the kind of self-talk that is needed most. It is at this level that you are painting a complete new picture of yourself, the way you really want to be, handing it to your subconscious and saying, "This is the me I want you to create."[28] His final level, the fifth, is the level of universal affirmation, the "it is" level. This is a very spiritual level Helstetter shares. An example of this positive self talk is "I am one with the universe and it is one with me. I am of it, within it, and exist as a shining spark of light in a firmament of divine goodness."[29]

Another important aspect of self-compassion is allowing ourselves to rest and recharge without guilt. We live in a culture that often glorifies constant productivity, but our minds and bodies need downtime to function optimally. Giving yourself permission to take breaks, enjoy hobbies, or simply relax without feeling guilty can help nurture a healthier relationship with yourself. This is underscored by an excellent book by John Mark Comer "The Ruthless

[25]Shad Helmstetter, *What to Say When You Talk to Yourself* (New York, New York: Gallery Books, 2017), 56.
[26] Helmstetter, 58.
[27] Helmstetter, 59.
[28] Helmstetter, 61.
[29] Helmstetter, 64.

Elimination of Hurry" which outlines the value of rest, and how it can improve your physical life and spiritual one.

Mindfulness can also play a key role in fostering self-compassion. Being mindful means staying present and accepting your thoughts and emotions without judgment. The practice of mindfulness helps you to recognize moments when you're being hard on yourself and gives you space to choose a kinder response.

It is crucial to remember that imperfection is part of being human. Accepting that everyone, including you, will have setbacks and struggles allows you to approach difficulties with greater gentleness. Self-compassion does not mean ignoring personal responsibility, it means you face a consequence head on, or recognize that the situation or project or relationship is not perfect, and may need time and more attention and perhaps skills to improve things. Take a deep breath, you are still valuable, loved, and lovable despite all the flaws and imperfections you may see. By practicing positive self-talk, taking time to rest, staying mindful, and embracing imperfection, we can cultivate a compassionate relationship with ourselves. This not only enhances personal well-being but also empowers us to be more empathetic toward others.

Being compassionate to others is a daunting task for the individual and for communities to tackle but the need for self-compassion is just as vital. The lack of compassion to ourselves is underscored in a compelling quote from Marianne Williamsons' book "A Return to Love". She writes, "It's become popular these days to blame practically everything on our parents. We figure it's because of them that our self-esteem is so low. If only they'd been different, we'd be brimming with self-love. But if you take a close look at how our parents treated us, whatever

abuse they gave us was often mild compared to the way we abuse ourselves today. It's true that your mother might have said repeatedly, 'You'll never be able to do that, dear.' But now you say to yourself, 'You're a jerk. You never do it right. You blew it. I hate you.' They might have been mean, but we're vicious."[30] Williamson suggests that our blame of parents or others for our lack of self-esteem and compassion toward ourselves is smaller in comparison to how hard we are on ourselves. Williamson's description may be over-generalized, as it may not always be the case that children are harder on themselves than their parents were to them, however, there is merit in the reality that we are much harder on ourselves than others, and we are particularly mean to ourselves, and it is to our own peril.

When I bring all of these components together, I see a connection between God, ourselves, and others as it relates to compassion. Our acceptance that God is compassionate, our willingness to accept divine compassion; and being compassionate to others. Compassion from God, to ourselves, and then to others. They all work together.

God is the source and giver of divine compassion to us, we then apply that to our own wounds of life and experience a weight lifted of releasing our sins and burdens and brokenness to a capable God, and now we can be compassionate to others because of our experience.
In a practical way, we are able to love people no matter what their race, gender, orientation, and status. We are moved at our core by brokenness in society and do what we can to express empathy and compassion in how we handle them. We are able to forgive those closest to us and repair relationships that have been broken. Compassionate living gives us life. We live longer, happier, and more peaceful lives in the midst of chaos. Let the cycle begin and spread.

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[30]Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles* (New York, New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 35.

Chapter 2

Theological and Biblical Foundations of Compassion

God as the Source of Compassion

In order to build a Theology of compassion, whether it is toward self or others one must begin with the divine. In Christian tradition, the divine is recognized among other names as creator of all things, giver of life, source of healing, and hope. Most importantly for this study, the divine is recognized as the source of compassion.

Starting at the Source

Jesus, the Son of God, is an example of what compassion in real life is. As Jesus walked the earth, he was often found healing the sick, raising the dead, and feeding the hungry. He shared stories of compassion in the teaching of loving your enemies, the return of the prodigal son, and perhaps the greatest compassion parable told, the Good Samaritan. The actions and teachings of Jesus underscore the demand of compassion for all to emulate.

According to Frank Rogers, "Religions promote compassion. All else is commentary. . . religious traditions are meant to be spiritual paths of transformative love. They are called to be schools of compassion."[31] This is a very helpful image to understand the universality of compassion, and how people in different traditions strive to embody compassion. There are many spiritual practices that are beautiful in their own right that focus on guiding people into the presence of the divine, and to enable them to have an intimate experience with the divine that can transform their perspectives, actions, and relationships. Among these changes is the ability to live and act compassionately towards themselves and towards others. As previously mentioned, the

[31] Frank Rogers, *Compassion in Practice: The Way of Jesus* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2016), 10.

Compassion Cycle begins with the understanding of divine activity towards us. The cycle begins with God; it flows to us, and then we pass compassion on to others.

However, there are some who feel or believe that God's compassion toward humanity is conditional and capricious. In other words, God is waiting for us to behave in an unjust, unkind, unmerciful, inconsiderate or uncompassionate way, so that God may punish us for our actions. This perspective leads the believer who desires to please God in every way to become hard on themselves and this makes it more difficult to believe that God loves, cares, and forgives. This perspective makes it challenging to begin the cycle with God if people are unwilling to look to God for compassion, or to seek God's mercy, forgiveness, care, or compassion.

Hebrew Bible Witness

Writers and voices in the Hebrew Bible, bear witness to a Compassionate God beginning with the book of Exodus in which God stands with Moses in the cloud and offers a self-description: "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness."(Exodus 34:6) This verse emphasizes God's enduring compassion and mercy that was foundational to the covenant with Israel.

Slavery is perhaps one of the cruelest ways humans cause harm to one another and use power over another. It lacks compassion at its core to enslave others and remove their freedom to live life on their terms. Slavery creates a compassion crisis. In Exodus 32-33, the Children of Israel who have been delivered out of 400 years of slavery and yet cannot shake the practice and belief in other gods and idols. You would think that after experiencing freedom at the hands of God in a miraculous escape that worshiping the God who had delivered them and given them

hope of a bright future and freedom would be a given; but it was not. It leads them to build a golden calf and worship it in a brief window while Moses is away spending time with God. God has a case for ending the relationship, but that is not what God does. God leans in at this dark moment with compassion toward the children of Israel. God renews God's covenant with Moses and with the children of Israel and demonstrates who He is, even when God has a case to end the relationship and bring a lawsuit against His betrayers, God pulls them in, with compassion. Exodus 34:6 illustrates this clearly by stating: "the LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness."

One could argue that Christians have an unsteady relationship with compassion as there have been many wars and bloodshed in the name of the compassionate God. We see in our society today that there are many well-meaning Christians who appear to be divisive in their actions toward non-believers and there is a rise of Christian nationalism in the United States. Of all places, the church is the one place one should find compassion, and at times compassion seems absent or drowned out by the shouts of "We're right, and you're wrong." But there is still hope and a path through this complicated and convoluted journey of life that has the promise of bringing healing and wholeness to humanity. The church and the world need it now more than ever before. Compassion is in crisis, even in the church, and radical movement, taught by Jesus can help. Rogers states, the "path of Jesus summed up as loving God with every dimension of our being, cultivating an authentic love for ourselves, and loving our neighbors as ourselves was, at its core, a way of radical compassion.

David, the prolific Psalmist points to God's compassion when he states "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him."(Psalm 103:13)

This metaphor articulates the attribute of God's tender care for humanity, likened to the love of a parent.

The book of Lamentations expresses communal laments over the destruction of Jerusalem and the people are comforted with the words: "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."(Lamentations 3:22-23) The compassion of God is never exhausted by the unfaithfulness of humanity, but is as dependable as the sunrise, and new every morning. Even in the midst of lament, the writer recognizes that Compassion is an essential attribute of God.

In the Hebrew Bible, compassion is often described using the term *rachamim*, derived from the root word for "womb," symbolizing a nurturing and protective love.[32] The compassion of Yahweh is central to the covenantal relationship with Israel, as seen in passages like Exodus 34:6 quoted above.

The story of humanity's origin in the Garden of Eden portrayed in the book of Genesis also introduces the entrance of sin, separation, and ultimately banishment from that garden because of sin. Since that moment humanity has experienced the compassion of creator God in that God did not scrap the first humans and start over, but showed empathy and compassion toward them, and their progeny. We still live under this act and attribute of God's compassionate love toward us at our worst.

[32] Frank Rogers, *Compassion in Practice: The Way of Jesus* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2016), 31.

New Testament Witness

In the New Testament, compassion becomes a hallmark of Jesus' ministry. The Greek term *splagchnizomai*—to be moved in one's innermost being—frequently describes Jesus' response to human suffering. The term *splagchnizomai* is used in two stories told by Jesus. In the first story, a father is moved by compassion as he welcomes his errant and prodigal son back home in Luke 15:20. The fathers compassion compels him to not only welcome his son without judgement and with open arms, but also to host a party in his honor to celebrate the son's return much to the chagrin of his older brother. In the second, and arguably the most well-known parable of Jesus about how to show compassion to others, Jesus points out that a Samaritan is moved by compassion and offers help to a man left for dead at the side of the road (Luke 10:33). Jesus also is moved by compassion when he heals two blind men (Matthew 20:34), and a leper (Mark 1:40-41).]

Marcus Borg interprets Jesus' compassion as a radical redefinition of holiness, shifting from laws of purity to a behavioral focus on inclusion, healing, and restorative justice. Borg indicates that Jesus "replaced the core value of purity with compassion. Compassion, not holiness, is the dominant quality of God, and is therefore to be the ethos (fundamental character) of the community that mirrors God."[33]

The theology expressed in the Epistles also highlights the role of compassion. In the letter to the Colossians, the writer is appealing to the Christian community when he writes: "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience" (Colossians 3:12). This aligns with the Christian belief and desire to be more and more like Christ.

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[33] Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 53-54.

Following the Example of Jesus' Compassion

WWJD, an acronym for "What would Jesus do?" was an expression that was popular during my high school years that would be found everywhere you looked, bumper stickers, silicone bracelets, shirts, hats, billboards, it seemed like it was ubiquitous. This expression was intended as a call to the reader to consider their next action and to filter it through the actions of Jesus. Of course, during my time in High School in the 1990's, more people were attending church and familiar, if only casually, with the actions of Jesus. Today, America is more secular than ever and some may even be offended by the acronym today. Even if you leave Jesus as the divine Son of God out of the equation and simply read about the work he did while on earth, you could conclude that he was compassionate to many people and his compassionate acts changed lives.

In the ministry of Jesus, compassion was not just a visceral and physical reaction, it was the source that led him to alleviate the suffering of people he encountered. Among those he healed were: Blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52), a man that was paralyzed (Mark 2:1-12), the woman with the issue of Blood (Mark 5:25-34), and the ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19).

The Gospels also record that Jesus healed crowds. One example from the gospel of Matthew states: "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick" (Matthew 14:14; see also: Matt 4:24; 8:16; 15:30-31).

The ability to see the other person who is in distress only happens when a heart of compassion has become a core part of one's life and one is willing to take action on behalf of another person. Jesus often took action that demonstrated his compassion through healing. However, we see expressions of Jesus' compassion in other actions such as feeding the hungry.

In Matthew's Gospel, "Jesus called his disciples to him and said, I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way" (Matthew 15:32).

Jesus's Teachings on Compassion

The Prodigal Son is one of the most well-known stories of the Bible. The son who takes his inheritance early and squanders it returns home and is accepted and loved like he had been there all along. The father in this parable represents God's compassionate love for sinners. When the son returns, the father "was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

Jesus calls his followers to a radical form of compassion which is rooted in this precept: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44). Jesus was challenging the status quo and raising the bar for those who would follow his example. Compassion demands a different approach to human difficulties, that you love and pray for those who wish you harm and express love. It is through the development of the compassionate heart that this becomes possible, even at the most difficult times. This is one of the most challenging parts of Jesus's teaching because it forces us to look beyond ourselves. Not only to those who love us, and it invites us to extend compassion to all people, even the people we find most difficult to love. This is the tension of compassion, loving all people. This is the way, the way of Jesus, the way we can also follow.

Another well-known and important teaching from Jesus about compassion is presented in the story of the Good Samaritan which touches on the important issues of race, time, social responsibility, and what is truly in the heart of those that are believers in God. In this story, the

heavy tension is palpable because even the religious leaders appeared unwilling to help or show compassion to the wounded man on the side of the road. In the end, it is the foreigner, a Samaritan, who shows kindness to the man left for dead. But help is not all he does. He goes further. He spends time addressing the man's wounds, transports him to a hotel, pays for the stay and even makes a promise to return and cover any future bills. The Samaritan embodied what compassion is supposed to look like. It is safe to assess that he had an experience with God, saw his need for God's compassion in his life, extended it to the wounded and dying man, and gave him a second chance at life. Literally. I can only imagine that as the man healed from his wounds, and realized that he did not have to pay a dime for the hotel where he was staying, he wondered about the God the Samaritan served.

The life and teachings of Jesus on compassion in action is demonstrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan. His care, his action, his compassionate love toward a stranger. The compassionate teachings of Jesus are crystalized further in an exchange with religious leaders who were seeking his wisdom. This is such a critical point, the text is found in all three synoptic gospels. Here is Mark's account:

> Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?" Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." So the scribe said to Him, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and

> sacrifices." Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." But after that no one dared question Him (Mark 12:28-31; see also Matthew 22:36-40, and Luke 10: 25-28)

Love God. Love People. Love yourself.

In light of this principle of a loving God, loving others as well as yourself is the companion Christian ethic of the golden rule found in Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:31. This text further embosses the stamp of the compassionate person by stating: So in everything do to others as you would have them do unto you (Matthew 7:12, NIV), and Luke's account declares, Do to others as you would have them do to you. (Luke 6:31, NIV).

Other Selected Perspectives on Compassion and the Golden Rule

There are many religious traditions around the world that have similar teachings about compassion and the golden rule. Islam's 40 Hadiths[34] contain a saying from Muhammad that is akin to the golden rule. The thirteenth saying is: "None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother that which he loves for himself."[35] Living Peace - International has compiled a list of many religious traditions and philosophers and their "golden rules":

> **Baha'ì:** "Blessed is who prefers his brother to himself" (*Bahà'u'llàh* tablets – 19th century). . . .
> **Confucianism:** "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you" (Confucius, *Analects* 15.23 – 5th century BC). . . .

[34]Jonathan A.C. Brown, "Hadith," Oxford Bibliographies, last modified December 14, 2009, https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0030.xml. Note: A Hadith (Arabic plural *aHadith*; the word "Hadith" is used as both a singular and a collective plural in English) is a report attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, describing his words and actions and representing the chief source for knowing his authoritative precedent (*Sunna*). Each Hadith consists of a text ascribed to Muhammad (*matn*) and a chain of transmission (*isnad*) for that text. Muslims view Hadith as the second major source for Islamic law and dogma. In effect, however, Hadith are arguably more important than the Qur'an.

[35] "Forty Hadith of an-Nawawi," Sunnah.com, accessed February 19, 2025, https://sunnah.com/nawawi40.

> **Judaism:** "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow-man. This is the entire Law, all the rest is commentary" (*Talmud, Shabbat* 3id – 16th century BC). . . .
> **Jainism:** "In happiness and sorrow, in joy and in pain, we should consider every creature as we consider ourselves" (*Mahavira, 24th Tirthankara* – 6th century BC). . . .
> **Hinduism:** "This is the sum of duty. Do not unto others that which would cause you pain if done to you" (*Mahabharata* 5, 1517 – 15th century BC). . . .
> **Native Americans:** "Respect for every form of life is the foundation" (*The Big Law of Peace*–16th century). . . .
> **Yoruba wise saying (West Africa**): "If somebody stings a bird with a sharp stick, should be first to try it on himself and realise how badly it hurts".[36]

Buddhism

While many traditions speak of the golden rule and compassion, Buddhism is one that places an emphasis on compassion and the way we treat others. The golden rule is expressed in this way: "Whatever is disagreeable to yourself, do not do unto others."[37] In addition to this, one of the cornerstone tenets of Buddhism is compassion. His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama points out that the essence of Buddhism is kindness and compassion. He states, "Inner tranquility comes from the development of love and compassion. The more we care for the happiness of others, the greater is our own sense of well-being. Cultivating a close, warmhearted feeling for others automatically puts the mind at ease and opens our inner door."[38] We can note that not only is compassion highlighted as an essential pillar of Buddhism but also that its presence is a continuing source of personal happiness and well-being.

We are instructed that "The moment you adopt a sense of caring for others, that brings inner strength. Inner strength brings us inner tranquility, [and] more self-confidence."[39] Compassion moves beyond personal happiness to engendering a commitment to care for others,

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[36] "Golden Rule." Living Peace - International, accessed February 19, 2025, http://livingpeaceinternational.org/en/the-project/330-regola-d-oro-2.html#:~:text=Hinduism%3A%20"This%20is%20the%20sum,1517%20–%2015th%20century%20BC).
[37] Ibid.
[38] Reginald Ray, ed., "Compassion," essay, in *The Wisdom of Tibetan Buddhism* (Shambhala, n.d.), 49–50.
[39] Ibid.

which in turn brings the individual inner strength and tranquility. This is a very important cycle that we can visualize as we begin to value compassion in our own lives. We can also note that the results are not only for the mind but also for the physical body. We are further instructed that "through inner disarmament we can develop a healthy mental attitude, which is also very beneficial for physical health . . . Therefore, peace of mind not only brings tranquility in our mind but also has good effects on our body."[40] These words spoken by the Dalai Lama encapsulate the deep importance of compassion, teaching and living. Compassion (*karuṇā*) is central to Buddhist ethics, where it is cultivated through practices such as Loving-Kindness Meditation."[41]

Conclusion

The core is that there are deep roots that are connected to the idea of loving kindness and doing good to all humanity in the form of compassion. Whether you are Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and many countless others, love people and love yourself and when you do that you are being and creating the compassionate community.

[40] Reginald A. Ray, ed., *The Wisdom of Tibetan Buddhism* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2017), 49-50.
[41] Ibid.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

This project brings together theoretical research about Compassion with a practical component. The practical research was geared towards members of the Valley Fellowship Seventh Day Adventist Church in Rialto, California in order to bring to light the importance of compassion and the ways it may impact self-awareness, leadership, and service in the world. The project was designed through a series of presentations, discussions, and opportunities for personal reflection to have participants from the Valley Fellowship SDA Church engage the concept of compassion using theoretical, theological, and biblical resources and discern how compassion can impact their self-awareness, leadership, and service in the world.

Preparing the Foundation

In preparation for research, I submitted my research plan and received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Claremont School of Theology. Since this project deals with human subjects, it was important to ensure that no personal identifiable information was collected, that confidentiality was maintained, and that participants privacy and dignity were protected. A letter was prepared for participants to sign ensuring informed consent from each person who participated in the research project.

Due to my role as the lead pastor of my church, the ability to communicate the opportunity to participate in this study. I made announcements during our worship experience combined with sending personal emails and text messages to members to enable the word to be

spread about the opportunity to engage in the learning of compassion. Though my congregation would be considered small with around 50 active members and attendees, my goal was to get 20-30 percent to become a part. That goal was achieved with 22 participants who were a part of the research.

Meeting Times and Locations

To cover the material that was prepared for the study, three 90-minute sessions were designed, one meeting through zoom, and two meetings in person. This allowed the greatest number of participants to be present. Next came the task of determining the dates we would meet and that was accomplished following a Sabbath service, where participants had an opportunity to sign their informed consent forms, and set in their calendar the dates we would meet.

The final schedule was set as follows: Session One: Sunday morning; Session Two: Wednesday evening (zoom); and Session Three: Thursday evening. It was easiest to meet at the church location as it has ample meeting room space and screens that are large enough for all to see and read the print of the slides. The room size was comfortable, with adequate heating, and sufficiently spacious to accommodate all participants, with most sitting at a table enabling them to take notes if they desired. Refreshments were provided for the in-person meetings at my expense, and this proved to be an appreciated gesture.

Session Format

Each session followed a similar format and style:

1. Refreshments and socializing with each other
2. General Announcements

3. Presentation (using power-point consisting of about 30 slides)
4. Questions & Answers
5. Homework Instructions
6. Prayer and Sending Forth

The first gathering time was devoted to provide an overview of the Research Project, and to explain the role of the informed consent forms for participants to sign.

Instruments and Tools

There are valuable tools available in studies of Compassion. I looked for tools that would provide relevant information to the participants. I also wanted tools that were easily accessible by all the participants. I chose a measure of self-compassion designed by Kristen Neff. It is an instrument that is broadly reviewed and highly assessed as a valid measure of self-compassion.[42] In addition to Dr. Neff's assessment, I also utilized an assessment that scored participants for both compassion to self and to others that were developed by Stanley Steindl and placed on a platform called NovoPsych.[43] It is important to observe that I did not receive any of the results from the assessments and that all data was sent directly to the emails of the participants to maintain their confidentiality throughout the process.

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[42] Kristin D. Neff et al., "Examining the Factor Structure of the Self-Compassion Scale in 20 Diverse Samples: Support for Use of a Total Score and Six Subscale Scores," *Psychological Assessment* 31, no. 1 (January 2019): 27–45, https://doi.org/10.1037/pas0000629.

[43] "Compassion Motivation and Action Scale—Self-Compassion (CMAS-Self), NovoPsych, accessed March 26, 2025, https://novopsych.com.au/assessments/formulation/compassion-motivation-and-action-scales-self-compassion-cmas-self/; Stanley R. Steindl et al., "The Compassion Motivation and Action Scales: A Self-Report Measure of Compassionate and Self-Compassionate Behaviours," *Australian Psychologist* 56, no. 2 (March 4, 2021): 93–110, https://doi.org/10.1080/00050067.2021.1893110.

I also supplied participants with journals for their own use for their own reflection, or for notes from the presentations. There was a variety offered with some being dot journals, some lined and some blank. Additional assessments were mentioned during presentations and discussions but participants were not expected to complete them as part of the sessions and feedback.[44] During the sessions there was time taken to answer questions and to receive feedback from participants to help enrich their understanding of the concepts. To gather and share information I used QR codes and sent emails with information and feedback forms to the participants. I used QR codes because scanning a QR code is far easier than typing in a long and often convoluted website domain address. Furthermore, most modern phones have the automatic functionality to read the codes. This was a great help.

Session 1

Session 1 was held in person. In session one , I laid the foundation for all the sessions. I utilized power-point slides in the presentation (see Appendix A). Starting at the beginning, I walked the participants through the core definitions of compassion, the reason why I felt moved to study it more deeply, and how compassion can have an impact on their lives. Our study of compassion was introduced from the perspective of God being the source of compassion and love. The session ended with participants completing a feedback form. All attendees were encouraged to complete homework for session two. Participants were asked to complete the self-compassion assessments, and document their results in the feedback form online (see

[44] Assessments that were mentioned were the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the Enneagram, and StrenghFinders. There are free versions of each of these assessments as well as paid versions. These tests can provide meaningful personal insight that do a deeper dive into helping develop a greater self-compassion, emotional intelligence, and self-awareness.

Appendix C). Participants were also asked to reflect on the content of a handout about accepting our imperfections and how we can consider a more compassionate approach to ourselves.

Session 2

Session two was conducted through zoom and in the evening time. Participants were encouraged to have their journals and to take notes, and the primary topic was clarifying the difference between pity, sympathy, empathy and compassion. The work of Theresa Wiseman was used to describe empathy and empathetic responses to others and ourselves.[45] We then discussed the Near Enemy of compassion in greater detail which is pity. This was helpful because pity often looks like compassion and understanding the difference between the two is enlightening. We then discussed Dr. Frank Rogers compassion practice of PULSE: P = Paying attention; U = Understanding Empathetically; L = Loving with connection; S = Sensing the sacred; and E = Embodying New Life.

P = Paying attention;
U = Understanding Empathetically;
L = Loving with connection;
S = Sensing the sacred;
E = Embodying New Life.

Each participant was encouraged to incorporate PULSE at an appropriate time. A feedback form was distributed to all participants in the format of a google form. Prayer was offered to close the session.

[45] Theresa Wiseman, "A Concept Analysis of Empathy," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 23, no. 6 (June 1996): 1162–67, https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1996.12213.x.

Session 3

Session three was held in person at the same location as session one. Food was provided for this session. All attendees were encouraged to bring their journals. The final session focused on self-compassion, self-awareness, and emotional intelligence. Once again, I presented through power-point and throughout the presentation I took questions from attendees. During this session I supplied three exercises from Kristen Neff as tools that can be utilized for compassion toward oneself.[46]

Exercise 1: How would you treat a friend?

Exercise 2: Self-Compassion Break;

Exercise 5: Changing Your Critical Self-Talk (see Appendix D).

The session concluded with prayer and appreciation for their attention and time.

Obstacles

Though most of the sessions experienced few setbacks, there were a few that I encountered. I learned that the weekend session and the Zoom session had the best attendance. This made sense to me because the weekend and Zoom were the most accommodating ways for participants to gather due to work schedules. The mid week session had the weakest attendance due to rain, several members had deaths in their family that took them out of town. Though this reality is out of my control it presented an obstacle that I encountered.

There were some that had technical difficulties with the QR code. As a person familiar with technology utilizing this was second nature but for a couple of attendees, they simply could

[46] Kristen Neff, "Self-Compassion Practices," Self-Compassion, accessed September 24, 2024, exercises 1, 2, and 5, https://self-compassion.org/self-compassion-practices/#self-compassion-exercises.

not get it to work. Learning from that experience I realized that having hard copies of the material and feedback would help resolve this issue, and so for session three, I had physical copies of the feedback forms to supplement the digital versions. This was the fertile middle ground. I also discovered that though the assessments which were online were tested on a phone, that some found it difficult to complete on such a small device. Most were able to complete it, but it took longer than I anticipated it would due to these minor but real obstacles. Some even elected to take it later once they were home.

Once the attendees had left the room and headed home, I found it very difficult to get the data I needed from them. Though all were well intentioned and desired to learn and report, I found that I needed to send reminders to the participants to complete their feedback forms along with their assessments. These reminders were helpful in getting more to return their feedback forms, but I realize that getting them to complete the forms while in the meeting space is by far the best way to ensure you receive timely and fresh thoughts and feedback.

Positives

My study had the benefit of involving various racial backgrounds, a wide age range of attendees with ages from 40 to - mid 70's. Participants were able to engage with others with different perspectives and life experiences. Participants also provided very helpful insights in their feedback forms.

There was also the added benefit of building community. There were three people who were not intimately connected to my church, in fact, they had never attended, but through an

invitation and interest in the subject matter, were a part of the sessions. This was an unexpected and exciting development that could potentially bring new people into the church because of this conversation. It has led me to consider continuing this subject and broadening the invitation to include the broader community.

Denominational Dynamics

My religious context, the Seventh-day Adventist denomination by and large is a conservative faith that has long kept distance from practices that seem to incorporate rituals that are not familiar, taught and encouraged. An example of this would be meditation and mindfulness which are both used and discussed in great detail as a way of cultivating compassion and strengthening your compassion toward self and others. There is room for growth in this area as these practices in the Adventist church are new. In my experience, Adventist have expressed a reluctance to fully embrace these practices. As an Adventist pastor for 25 years, I have heard that the idea of contemplative practice or prayer has been a source of contention, and discussion. It has been best to know my audience, and to be cautious when using these terms as they can be misinterpreted and misunderstood. I chose to avoid direct teaching and practice (breathing exercises, sitting for periods of time in silence and guided meditation to name a few) as I believe these would be best introduced after more teaching is done. I personally have participated in these practices and find tremendous value in them and utilize them as part of my personal practice, however, observing and understanding my current context, these practices were not explicitly included.

Conclusion

I agree that there are a plethora of resources that are available for use, but the sources that were included in my study may serve as a helpful reference for others who have interest in the study of compassion.

Chapter 4

Discussion of Results

It would be easiest to report the results from each session independently and then in the conclusion provide my assessment of the findings.

The response to session one based on the feedback was positive with respondents sharing feedback like "I found the distinction between pity, sympathy, empathy and compassion to be most meaningful because it painted a clear picture of just what compassion looks like and what it entails" and that they were enlightened about the definition of compassion and what compassion is often confused with. Attendees found it helpful to be with others discussing the topic. One commented "Discussing compassion in a group setting and pondering on it from various points of view" was what she appreciated the most. In general, the sentiment was that the session was insightful, informational, and thought provoking.

There were three assessments associated with Session 1. First, there was the assessment from Dr. Kristen Neff, which provided feedback on self compassion, and and two assessments from NovoPsych.[47] All three of these assessments were simple to use, understand, and private to each person who took the survey. Once the results were sent to the participants individually, they reported the results themselves in a separate feedback form.

The Compassion Cycle indicates that we receive compassion from God. We apply God's compassion to our lives, and this enables us to wholeheartedly give compassion to others. This was a key concept in session one. The response yielded interesting results, as shown below:

[47] "Compassion Motivation and Action Scale."

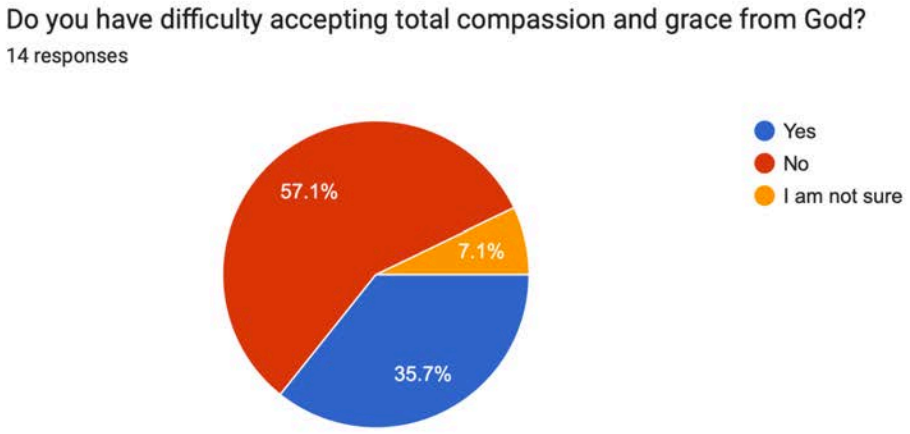


Figure 4

Nearly 40% of respondents acknowledged that they have difficulty accepting the grace and compassion that comes from God. This is an important finding because the genesis of the Compassion Cycle begins with accepting God's limitless compassion for the individual personally.

Furthermore, the question was asked if there was a correlation between their feelings about God's compassion for them and compassion toward themselves. The results speak for themselves.

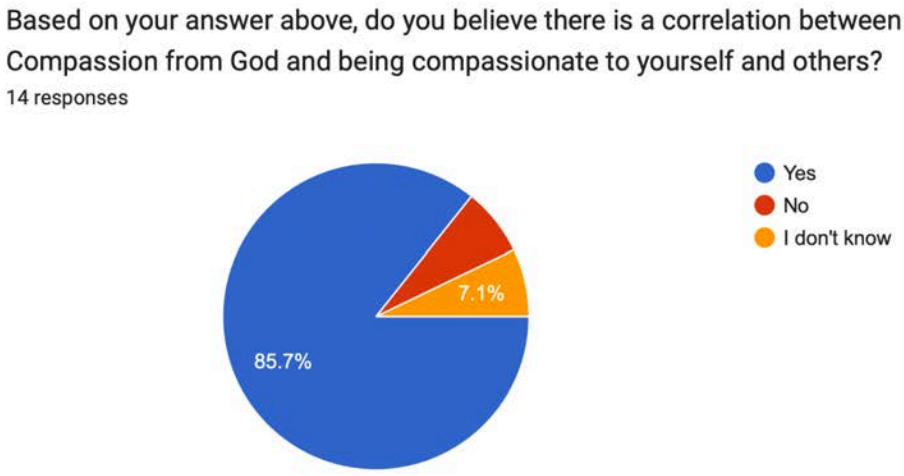

Based on your answer above, do you believe there is a correlation between you accepting Compassion from God and being compassionate to yourself and others?
14 responses
Yes
No
I don't know
7.1%
85.7%

Figure 5

The vast majority of respondents (86%) believe that there is a correlation between their accepting of God's compassion and their being compassionate to themselves and also to others. Participants were asked about their perception of the church's behavior towards others or its response to them in difficult times in light of their understanding of the nuances between pity, sympathy, empathy and compassion. Most respondents (57%) thought that "empathetic" best describes the church's response. The responses demonstrated that the church felt the church was very empathetic, but fell twenty percentage points behind being compassionate. This is once again a significant finding because we expect to hear that a church would act in a compassionate way. However, according to the respondents the church's response can best be described as empathic.

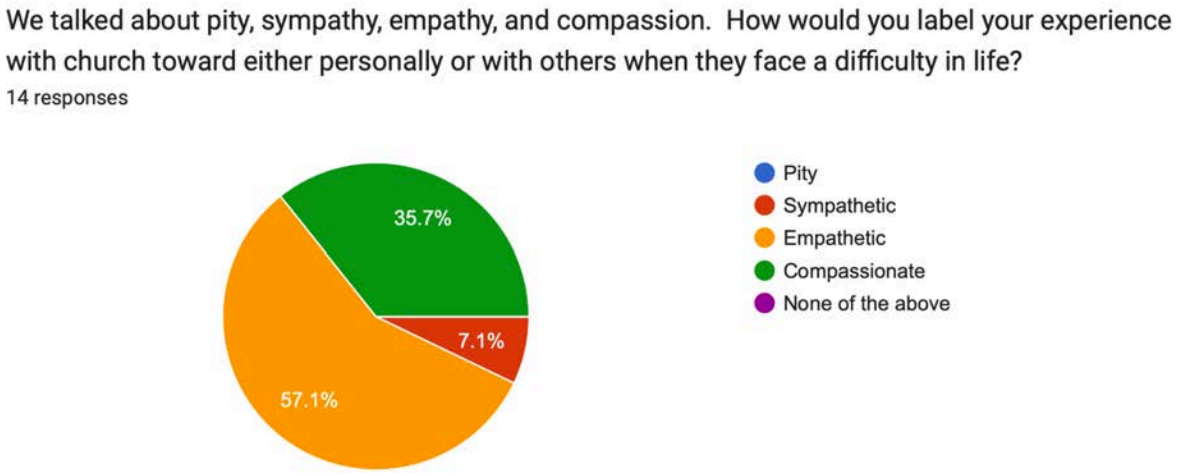

We talked about pity, sympathy, empathy, and compassion. How would you label your experience with church toward either personally or with others when they face a difficulty in life?
14 responses
35.7%
7.1%
57.1%
Pity
Sympathetic
Empathetic
Compassionate
None of the above

Figure 6

One respondent stated “It seems that the church has often ostracized those who have sinned in more public ways and left them alone to deal with the fallout. They were not “with” people. I think the church could do better.”

Session 2

At the conclusion of session 2 the feedback form asked for the attendees to share the results of the two assessments that measured their compassion toward themselves and their compassion to others. The assessment was from Novopsych and took about 10 minutes to complete each one. The responses on the feedback form were divided into four categories low (0-30), low mid (31-50), mid high (51-70) and high (71-100). There were four ratings given at the assessment conclusion. The total score, and scores for intention, distress tolerance, and

action. According to the designers of the assessment a healthy score is around the 50 range for each category.[48]

The first data response was about compassion to others. Respondents indicated the range of their total score. It was encouraging to see that forty percent (40%) of the respondents scored overall in the high range (71-100). Another twenty percent (20%) scored in the mid high range. However, forty percent (40%) were in the mid low range. This indicates that there was room for growth in the measure of their compassion towards others.

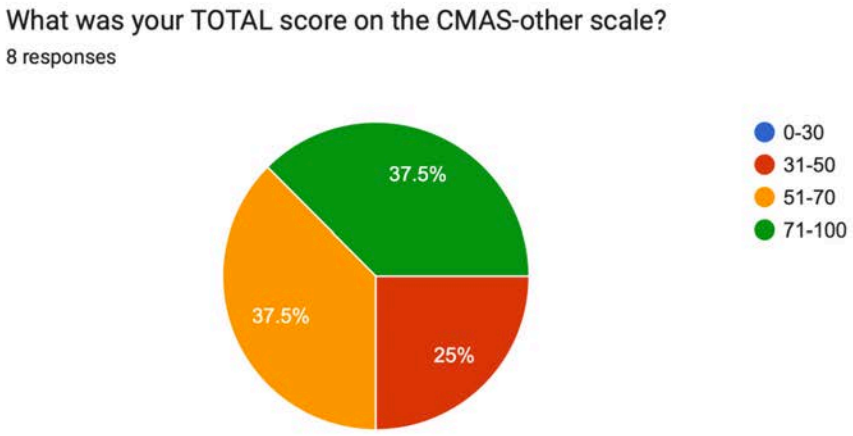


Figure 7

Compassion Intention measures a person's intent to be compassionate towards other people. As it relates to intention, the results reveal an opportunity for growth and development, and tools that support compassionate intentions toward others with seventy-five (75%) of respondents measuring low and mid low scores.

[48] A normative percentile for the total score and subscales is calculated based on a sample from Australia, USA, UK, and New Zealand (Steindl et al., 2021), indicating how the respondent scored in relation to a typical pattern of responding for adults. For example, a percentile of 50 indicates typical (and healthy) patterns of self-compassion, whereas a percentile of 5 indicates very low levels of self-compassion.

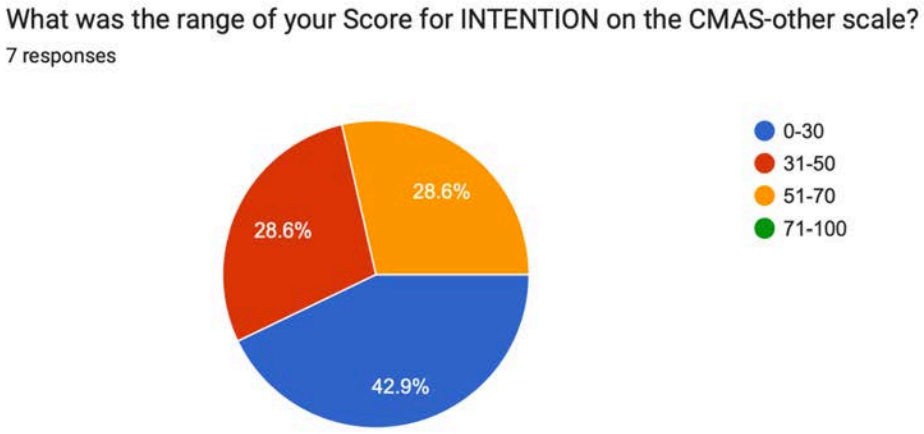


Figure 7

Compassion Distress tolerance measures the ability of a person to tolerate distress when others are experiencing suffering. As it relates to Distress Tolerance, the results also indicate room for growth and development, and tools that support Compassion Distress Tolerance toward others with over 40 percent (42.9%) of respondents measuring low; and over 40 percent (42.9%) measuring mid low scores.

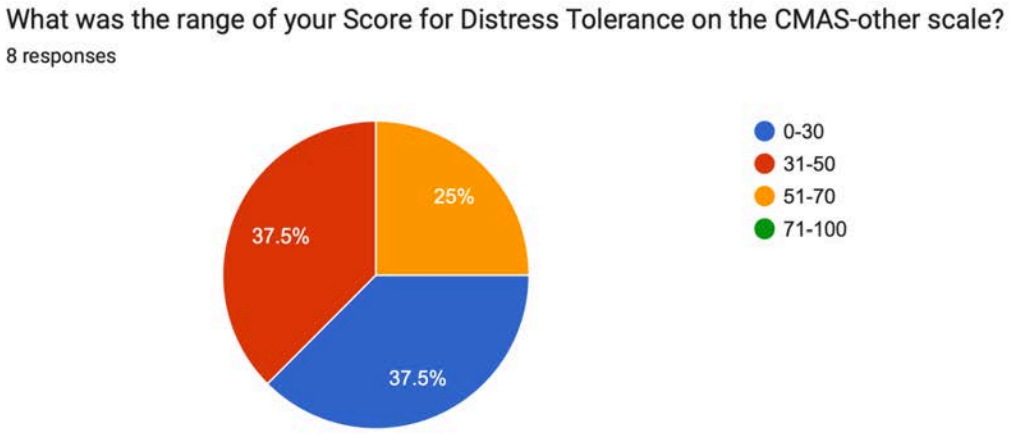


Figure 8

Compassion Action deals with the action of the respondent. The scale measures compassionate action and behaviors toward another person who is suffering and in need of compassion.

The results indicate that in terms of compassionate action and behavior the majority of respondents (66%) measured in the mid low range. This, also, suggests that there is room for growth in the area of compassionate action among the respondents.

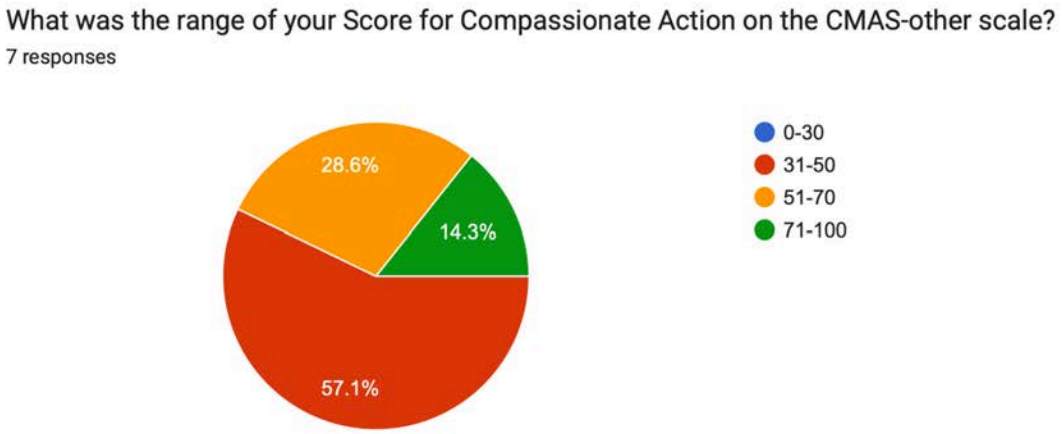


Figure 9

Self Compassion Results

The Second data response was about Self Compassion. It used the Compassion Motivation and Action Scales – Self-Compassion (CMAS-Self). The scale measures three areas: (i) Self-Compassionate Intention; (ii) Self-Compassionate Distress Tolerance; and (iii) Self-Compassionate Action. All items are summed to provide an overall score, with higher scores indicative of more self-compassion.

Respondents spread across all four measures. It was encouraging to see that over forty percent (42.9%) of the respondents scored overall in the high range (71-100). Another 14% scored in the mid high range. However, there were approximately 28% of respondents in the mid low rane, and 14% in the low range. So, a significant minority of respondents (42%) showed that in the area of self-compassion, there is room for growth and improvement.

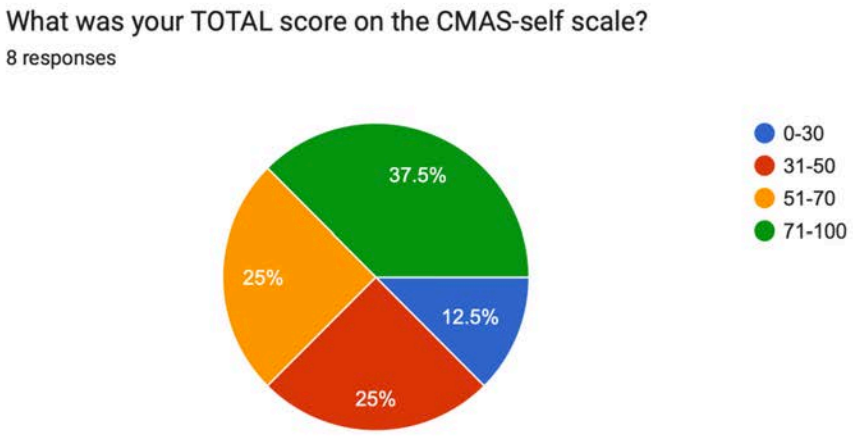


Figure 10

The Self-Compassion Intention scale measures a person's intent to be compassionate towards oneself. As it relates to intention, the results reveal that respondents were measuring low on the scale of intent to be compassionate to themselves. This first measure indicates the need for growth and development, and tools that support compassionate intentions toward self with zero percent of respondents with high scores, approximately 29% in the mid high range, and the majority (57%) of respondents measuring low.

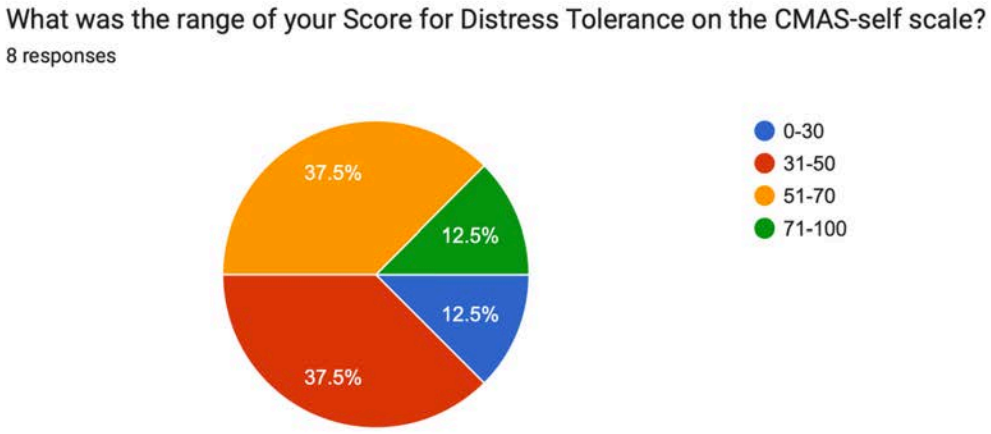


Figure 11

The Self-Compassion Distress tolerance measures the ability of a person to tolerate distress by oneself when experiencing suffering which is a precondition for compassion. As it relates to Distress Tolerance, the results also indicate room for growth and development, and tools that support Compassion Distress Tolerance toward oneself only about 14% of respondents in the high score range; 29% in the mid high range; the largest group (43%) in the mid low range; and about 14% with low scores.

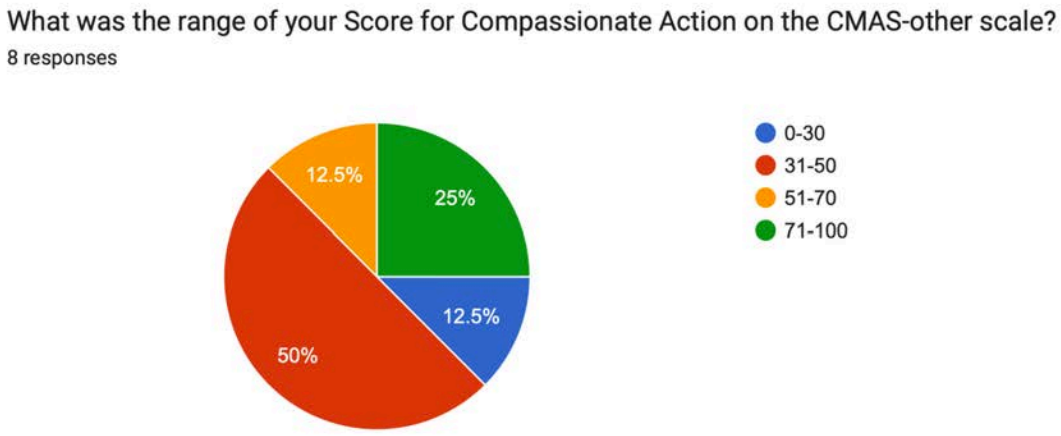


Figure 12

The Self-Compassionate Action deals with the action of the respondent. The scale measures self-compassionate actions and behaviors over the last week. The majority measured mid low (57%) with another additional group (14%) measuring low.

The results indicate that in terms of compassionate action and behavior the majority of respondents (71%) were struggling with acting compassionately towards themselves. So, there is room for growth in the area of compassionate action among the respondents.

In light of the assessments about compassion to themselves and to others, a feedback question was asked, what did they find most challenging about being compassionate to others? One response was “I think the most challenging part for me is using empathy to understand what others are going through. What may be easy for me, or what may seem like common sense, may be extremely difficult for others. It takes time to stop and consider someone else's perspective, so I need to practice taking the time to slow down and think through what others may be

experiencing." Others shared that boundary setting, and accepting people as they are were also challenging for them to navigate.

Given the need for tools to navigate challenging situations the framework of PULSE was introduced during the session, and asked if they believed it could be useful in challenging situations. PULSE is a framework developed by Dr. Frank Rogers where a person can extend compassion to another or to themselves, the acronym represents these behaviors:

P = Paying attention;
U = Understanding Empathetically;
L = Loving with connection;
S = Sensing the sacred;
E = Embodying New Life.

We discussed this process in detail and it prompted this reflective thought from a participant, "The PULSE method gives you tangible steps in which to follow to develop compassion. Instead of being an abstract concept, this breaks it down into manageable steps that anyone can follow. For me, it is specifically helpful to remember to pause and to develop an understanding of what others are going through before making any judgments on outcomes." Another expressed "Stop, breathe, pulse because your first thoughts are to defend and to challenge." These responses appear to demonstrate that though it was a new concept, participants were open to new approaches that could be part of their own work towards becoming more compassionate.

According to the feedback on Session two, most participants found the content helpful and informative. Some participants shared that practicing PULSE was helpful, and the subject was not only relevant but also particularly important to them.

Session 3

Session three was the culmination of the series on compassion and its impact on each person. Up to this point the teaching, journaling, and conversation had been building to ask the question if learning about compassion contributed to their view of themselves and if they were more aware of how they could be more compassionate towards others and themselves.

All the participants agreed that the material made them more aware of compassion in their life and in the world. They also gave examples of how within the past week they took the time during an incident to reflect on needing to be compassionate to someone or themselves.

When asked about the compassion cycle and what resonated, all the participants indicated that it was a deep desire to understand that God has compassion for them. Once again, the results indicate that more needs to be done to experience the compassion and love of God on a personal level. When asked why understanding God's compassion was particularly valuable, participants shared that they didn't truly believe that they were worthy of God's love. One person observed that "understanding God's compassion for them seeps into other areas of life." Another view that surfaced was that they have difficulty receiving love and they realize that they have to learn to love themselves more and that will lead to believing and accepting that others and God loves them too.

When asked about their experience with PULSE the answers included such views as: feeling it would help with meetings; having the potential to increase patience with themselves

and others; helping with communicating with family, and even more specifically feeling the need to work on paying attention.

A question was asked if the sessions had moved them to do greater service in the world or the church. The responses were mixed with some saying that they already are deeply committed to service at church and this created no change, and some responded that the workshop definitely guided the way they served daily. Based on the data returned it appears that the sessions did not increase the desire for service within the church directly. However, it did impact behavior in the world.

The final question asked about what compassion practices they would recommend for the church. The responses were wide ranging. One example was to open up the church to hear stories of members and strangers and pray with people who are in the struggles of life. Others suggested meeting the needs of the marginalized, and offering more sessions on this very subject of compassion to delve deeper into the ways in which it can help on a personal and spiritual level. There was also the view that the church should strive to be more compassionate and less judgmental. One participant stated that "recognizing that God is the giver of compassion should help us share that compassion with others - even when they don't reach the standard of behavior that we feel they should."

Conclusion

The feedback to the sessions was tremendously insightful not only in discovering the sentiment the group had about compassion, but it also presented a path for teaching and study for

the future. There appears to be a hunger to grow in this area, and it is reassuring to have empirical data to build upon.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

As I reviewed the feedback I found it interesting that many struggled in their deep belief that God had compassion for them. I was moved to learn that there is work to do in believing that God loves us despite our worst moments, habits, and failures. From the results of the various assessment tools, and our workshop discussions, there seemed to be a deep sense of needing assurance that God was in their corner. I am hopeful that the time we shared cleared a path that leads to the compassionate God who loves us with unconditional love. The results indicated that the feelings one has about God's compassion toward them directly correlated with each participant's capacity to offer compassion to themselves. This is why the compassion cycle is so critical in my opinion. If we can embrace step one, that God loves us with unconditional love and God's compassion for us cannot be exhausted, then we can begin to release the weight and become able to forgive ourselves. But if we cannot embody step one, then we will fall short of embracing ourselves. I see the value that learning and embracing myself has brought peace to me.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

I lead a church that is active in helping the unhoused, and supporting those that are suffering, but it was clear from the data that action was a low point. It causes me to ponder if there is a need to clarify how to take action within the realm of compassion. Empathy was a strength that came out in both the surveys and conversations during the presentations, but there is some hesitation about action, and compassion demands action. It is an adage that is often

repeated when change is mandated, your actions speak louder than your words, and the adage holds true when it comes to being compassionate. Action makes a difference.

Be a "Withness"

A key concept with compassion is being with the suffering. You cannot be compassionate if you are unwilling to be with the marginalized, with the widow, with the crying, with the sick, compassion demands that you be a "withness" to humanity. The act of being with and doing requires time and attention, it insists on you knowing where you end and others begin, you must be self-aware and become attuned to your surroundings. Being a "withness" is not easy and can be emotionally draining, but the act of being with people is at the center of compassionate behavior.

As I reviewed the responses of the participants, some shared their struggle to be compassionate to themselves for various reasons, and even expressed that at times it was easier to be with others than to deal with themselves. Though not all had this particular challenge I can understand the sentiment. If we are challenged in believing that God wants to be with us despite our flaws, then the natural assumption is that to be with oneself is also difficult. To be a "withness" to oneself opens doors and perhaps wounds that are too painful to reflect on. The connection between how one views oneself and their willingness to be with themselves and to seek out healing and be compassionate and forgiving is a challenging road but a humbling and valuable journey, that if done with compassion will turn darkness into light.

Room for Growth

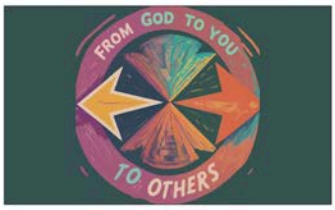
Because the church is full of people who are changing daily and people make up the church it is constantly evolving. Sometimes it is growing healthier and sometimes the church is on life support. In my study, the role of the church to be compassionate to its members is expected, but not always experienced. The way the church manages conflict, pregnancy out of wedlock, infidelity, and other human failure has been less than compassionate in the eyes of some. This has led, at Valley Fellowship, for some to leave due to the hurt and pain of not experiencing compassion in times of distress. In one such case, a group of members may have remained if communication from leadership would have been honest and compassionate. The church has work to do as a whole and it begins with each person being willing to see and respond genuinely to the story of another, even if the result is difficult, the relationship, in my opinion stands a chance to be retained and even improved. But compassionate conversations take time, and intention to be successful.

Moving Forward

It was encouraging to hear that the participants not only want to hear more about how to utilize the compassion cycle in their lives but believe that it will benefit others and more opportunities to discuss this subject should take place. After reviewing the literature, considering the various perspectives of compassion and diving deeper into the subject, I have come to appreciate the complexities embodied in this subject matter. I cannot look at myself, others, or my church the same way after engaging in this study. Ultimately, I am changed for the better and my sincere hope is that my church and the countless others who will encounter my

members will experience love, compassion and God in a renewed way. It is my intention to carry on in this vein and by God's grace become more and more compassionate as a church body. I have one recommendation to share. The subject of compassion is large but I believe that there is unexplored territory within the Seventh-day Adventist church. The practice of mediation within the Seventh-day Adventist context as a way of expanding the practice of compassion is one area that can be studied further. There are many tools of meditative practice to choose from and some from authors I mention here in this project, Rogers, Drietcer, and Armstrong are good places to begin. It is my opinion that under the right circumstances, this can be studied.

Appendix A: Slides Used in Sessions



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Scenario 1
You're rushing to the grocery store when someone ahead of you in line fumbles with their wallet. The line grows longer, and you hear frustrated sighs behind you. The person finally apologizes, looking overwhelmed. How do you respond?

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Scenario 1
What you don't know is that they just lost their job, and every penny they spend now feels like a mountain. Challenge: Can you set aside your impatience and offer a kind word or assistance, even if it means waiting longer?

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Scenario 2
A coworker has been snapping at everyone during meetings lately. It's tempting to dismiss them as rude or unprofessional. After all, we're in the same conditions and need to get work done, and they are making it more difficult.

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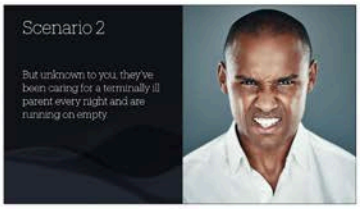

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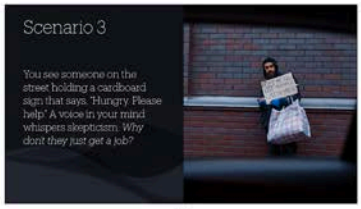
Scenario 3
You see someone on the street holding a cardboard sign that says, "Hungry. Please help." A voice in your mind whispers skepticism. Why don't they just get a job?

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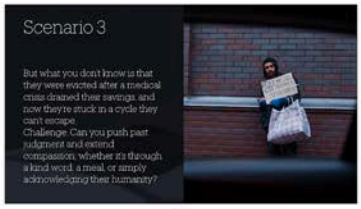
Scenario 3
But what you don't know is that they were evicted after a medical crisis drained their savings, and now they're stuck in a cycle they can't escape. Challenge: Can you push past judgment and extend compassion, whether it's through a kind word, a meal, or simply acknowledging their humanity?

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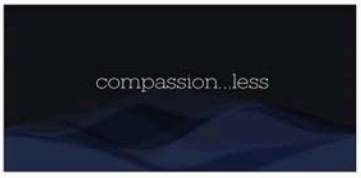

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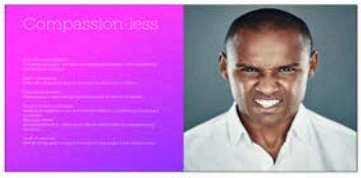

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Psalm 103:13
"As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion
on those who fear him."
This metaphor shows God's tender care for humanity, likened to the love
of a parent

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Lamentations 3:22-23:
"Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for
His compassions never fail. They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness."

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Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines compassion as
"Sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it."
Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines compassion as
"Sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others."

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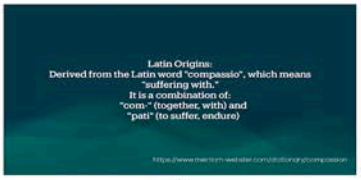
Latin Origins:
Derived from the Latin word "compassio", which means "suffering with."
It is a combination of:
"com-" (together, with) and
"pati" (to suffer, endure)

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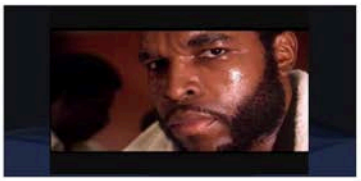

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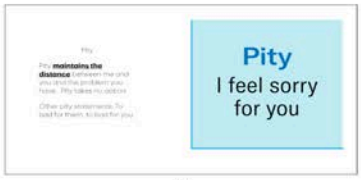

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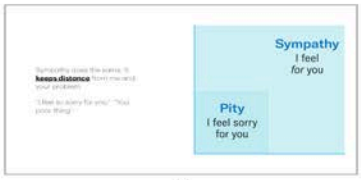

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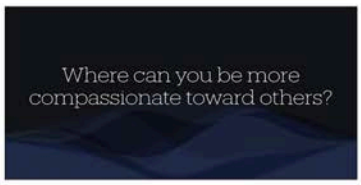

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Lamentations 3:22-23
"Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for
His compassions never fail. They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness."

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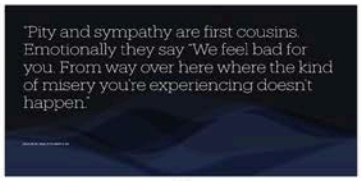
"Pity and sympathy are first cousins. Emotionally they say "We feel bad for you. From way over here where the kind of misery you're experiencing doesn't happen."

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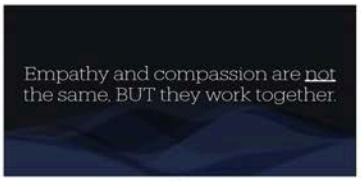

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Near enemies are tricky because they feel or look like virtues but they lack the depth and authenticity of the true quality. Recognizing these subtle distortions helps in cultivating genuine virtues rather than settling for their imitations

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The "near enemy" of Compassion is Pity
Examples:
Pity: "Oh, I feel so sorry for them. Glad I'm not in their position."
Compassion: "I see their pain, and I want to help or be present for them."

74

Pity involves four elements
1. The suffering person is inferior
2. A self-focused reaction that does not include providing help
3. A desire to maintain emotional distance
4. Avoidance of sharing in the other person's suffering

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"Half of Americans believe our society in general is not compassionate and does not place a high value on compassion for others"

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The University of Michigan synthasized data from thirteen thousand students from 1979-2009 and found that students concern for others had declined sharply and the decline was excelerating

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People are becoming more and more focused on themselves and less on others...and it is starting with how our kids are being raised.

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"Two-thirds of our youth feel that their parents do not value caring for others as much as they value achievements and accolades."

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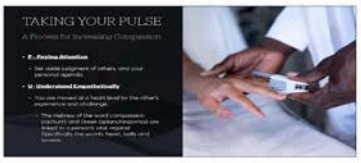

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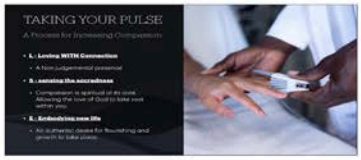

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"Acting out of genuine compassion often requires careful discernment. For example, what does it look like when the wound caused by another is still fresh or when and offender refuses to curb his or her villence and remain unrepentant? Compassionate action MUST serve and sustain our OWN healing and restoration. The act of cultivatin compassion does not invite us to minimize our needs for healing and wholness, silence our voiceam abandon our personal power, or lose ourselve in endless caretaking to the point of depletion and fatigue"

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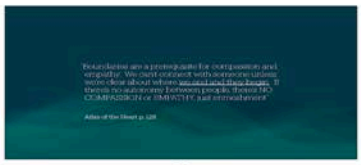

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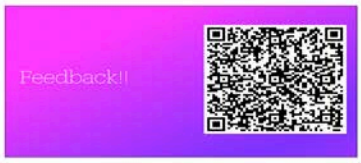

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How to Be Compassionate Toward Yourself: Emotional Intelligence and Self Awareness
Building Emotional Resilience Through Self Understanding

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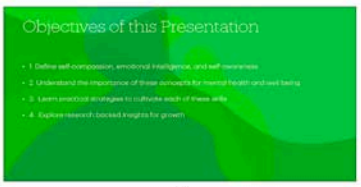

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Definition (Neff, 2003): Self-compassion involves treating yourself with kindness, recognizing your shared humanity, and being mindful when considering personal flaws

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Key Concepts
• Self Kindness vs. Self Judgment
• Common humanity vs. Isolation
• Mindfulness vs. over-identification
• "Talk to yourself like you would to someone you love" - Brene Brown

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Self Compassion Matters because
1. Reduces anxiety, depressing and stress (Neff & Germer, 2013)
2. Increases resilience and emotional well being
3. Enhances motivation with our harsh self-criticism
4. Fosters healthier relationships

105

Ways you can build Self - Compassion
1. Practice positive self talk
2. Rest! Allow yourself to recharge through what you find restful and energizing
3. Keep a self compassion journal
4. Use guided meditations for self kindness (See handout with suggestions)

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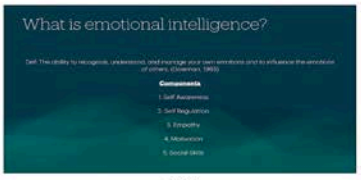

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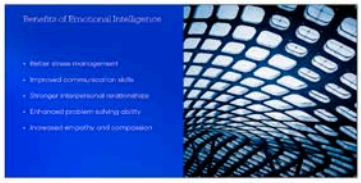
Benefits of Emotional Intelligence
• Better stress management
• Improved communication skills
• Stronger interpersonal relationships
• Enhanced problem solving ability
• Increased empathy and compassion

109

How to build Emotional Intelligence
1. Recognize and label emotions as they occur
2. Reflect before reacting
3. Practice empathy by understanding others prespectives
4. Develop active listening skills
5. Cultivate positive self regulation habits (deep breathing, mindfulness)

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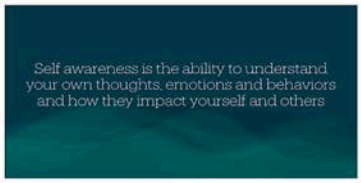
Self awareness is the ability to understand your own thoughts, emotions and behaviors and how they impact yourself and others

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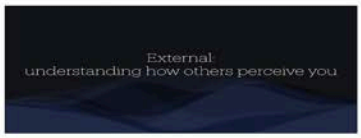

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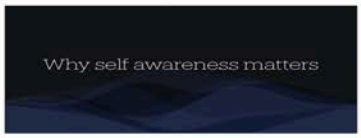

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Self Awareness Development
1. Practice mindfulness
2. Seek feedback from trusted sources
3. Maintain a reflective journal
4. Identify emotional triggers

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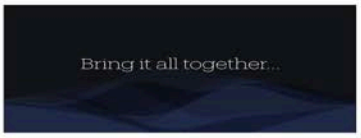

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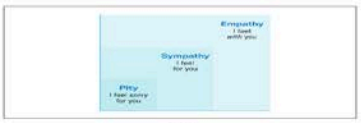

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Integration
• Self compassion foster better emotion regulation which is a key aspect of emotional intelligence
• Emotional intelligence enhanced self awareness and interpersonal relationships
• Self awareness help identify when self compassion is needed

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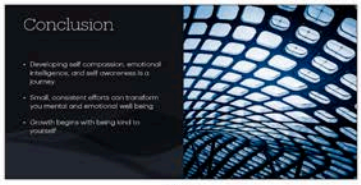
Conclusion
• Developing self compassion, emotional intelligence, and self awareness is a journey
• Small, consistent efforts can transform you mental and emotional well being
• Growth begins with being kind to yourself

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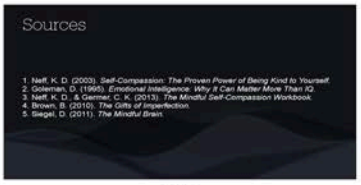
Sources
1. Neff, K. D. (2003). Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself.
2. Goleman, D. (1995). Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ.
3. Neff, K. D., & Germer, C. K. (2013). The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook.
4. Brown, B. (2010). The Gifts of Imperfection.
5. Siegel, D. (2011). The Mindful Brain.

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Appendix B

NovoPsych

Compassion Motivation and Action Scales - Compassion (CMAS-other)

Instructions:

Disappointments, distress and suffering are part of the human experience. The following items relate to how you feel and respond to others during times of suffering. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. Do not spend too much time thinking about each statement. There are no right or wrong answers.

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I want to be kinder and more caring towards people I don't know	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2	I plan to take action and be more helpful to others	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3	I am going to show more care and concern when I see people hurting	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4	I am able to cope with my feelings in response to another person's suffering	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5	I feel confident that I can cope with the distress that another person might be experiencing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6	I am able to be with someone who is struggling in their life	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7	Compared to usual, I have acted more compassionately towards others over the past week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	Over the past week I have been more helpful than usual	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9	The past week has seen me take more action in relieving another's suffering	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10	I have been actively more kind this past week to others in my life who are struggling	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11	I have offered support to people in need more than usual over the past week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12	Compared to usual, this past week I have been more compassionate to people who are struggling	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Developer Reference:

Steindl, S. R., Tellegen, C. L., Filus, A., Seppälä, E., Doty, J. R., & Kirby, J. N. (2021). The Compassion Motivation and Action Scales: a self-report measure of compassionate and self-compassionate behaviours. Australian Psychologist, 56(2), 93–110. https://doi.org/10.1080/00050067.2021.1893110

Appendix C

NovoPsych

Compassion Motivation and Action Scales - Self-Compassion (CMAS-self)

Instructions:

Disappointments, distress and suffering are part of the human experience. The following items relate to how you feel and respond to yourself during times of suffering. Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. Do not spend too much time thinking about each statement. There are no right or wrong answers.

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I wish to be kind and caring towards myself when faced with difficulties	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2	I want to be supportive towards myself when I face disappointments in my life	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3	Being compassionate towards myself will improve my overall wellbeing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4	Being accepting of myself will help improve my quality of life	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5	There are lots of reasons to be more self-compassionate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6	I am confident that I can be kind and caring towards myself when struggling with problems	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7	I am able to be loving towards myself when I feel emotional pain	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	I can show tolerance towards myself in times of hardship	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9	I have the ability to be supportive of myself when I feel like I have failed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10	I am able to be kind to myself, even when it feels uncomfortable to do so	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11	I am able to cope with facing my own struggles in order to be kind to myself	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12	I can cope with the difficult feelings that come with attending to my own needs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13	Compared to usual, I have acted more self-compassionately over the past week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14	Over the past week I have been more kind and caring towards myself than usual	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15	I have been taking steps over the past week to show myself more self-compassion	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Appendix D: Journaling exercises

Exercise 1: How would you treat a friend?

Please take out a sheet of paper and answer the following questions:

1. First, think about times when a close friend feels really bad about him or herself or is really struggling in some way. How would you respond to your friend in this situation (especially when you're at your best)? Please write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you typically talk to your friends.
2. Now think about times when you feel bad about yourself or are struggling. How do you typically respond to yourself in these situations? Please write down what you typically do, what you say, and note the tone in which you talk to yourself.
3. Did you notice a difference? If so, ask yourself why. What factors or fears come into play that lead you to treat yourself and others so differently?
4. Please write down how you think things might change if you responded to yourself in the same way you typically respond to a close friend when you're suffering.

Why not try treating yourself like a good friend and see what happens?

Exercise 2: Self-Compassion Break

Think of a situation in your life that is difficult, that is causing you stress. Call the situation to mind, and see if you can actually feel the stress and emotional discomfort in your body.

Now, say to yourself:

1. This is a moment of suffering

That's mindfulness. Other options include:

- This hurts.
- Ouch.
- This is stress.

2. Suffering is a part of life

That's common humanity. Other options include:

- Other people feel this way.
- I'm not alone.
- We all struggle in our lives.

Now, put your hands over your heart, feel the warmth of your hands and the gentle touch of your hands on your chest. Or adopt the soothing touch you discovered felt right for you.

3. May I be kind to myself

You can also ask yourself, "What do I need to hear right now to express kindness to myself?" Is there a phrase that speaks to you in your particular situation, such as:

- May I give myself the compassion that I need
- May I learn to accept myself as I am
- May I forgive myself
- May I be strong
- May I be patient

This practice can be used any time of day or night and will help you remember to evoke the three aspects of self-compassion when you need it most.

Exercise 5: Changing your critical self-talk

This exercise should be done over several weeks and will eventually form the blueprint for changing how you relate to yourself long-term. Some people find it useful to work on their inner critic by writing in a journal. Others are more comfortable doing it via internal dialogues. If you are someone who likes to write things down and revisit them later, journaling can be an excellent tool for transformation. If you are someone (like me) who never manages to be consistent with a journal, then do whatever works for you. You can speak aloud to yourself, or think silently.

1. The first step towards changing how you treat yourself is to notice when you are being self-critical. It may be that – like many of us — your self-critical voice is so common for you that you don't even notice when it is present. Whenever you're feeling bad about something, think about what you've just said to yourself. Try to be as accurate as possible, noting your inner speech verbatim. What words do you actually use when you're self-critical? Are there key phrases that come up over and over again? What is the tone of your voice – harsh, cold, angry? Does the voice remind you of anyone in your past who was critical of you? You want to be able to get to know the inner self-critic very well, and to become aware of when your inner judge is active. For instance, if you've just overslept and missed an important meeting, does your inner voice say something like "You're such a screw-up," "What a loser," and so on? Really try to get a clear sense of how you talk to yourself.
2. Make an active effort to soften the self-critical voice, but do so with compassion rather than self-judgment (i.e., don't say "you're such a monster" to your inner critic!). Say something like, "I know you're worried about me and feel unsafe, but you are causing me unnecessary pain. Could you let my inner compassionate self say a few words now?"
3. Reframe the observations made by your inner critic in a friendly, constructive way. If you're having trouble thinking of what words to use, you might want to imagine what a very compassionate friend would say to you in this situation. For instance, you can say something like "I know you felt horrible about missing the meeting. It was a mistake that could happen to anyone. You have been staying up late, scrolling on your phone, and probably aren't getting enough sleep. Maybe you could try putting your phone away by ten? I want you to be well rested so you can get your best work done each day." While engaging in this supportive self-talk, you might want to try gently stroking your arm, or holding your face tenderly in your hands (as long as no one's looking). Physical gestures of warmth can tap into the caregiving system even if you're having trouble calling up emotions of kindness at first, releasing oxytocin that will help change your bio-chemistry. The important thing is that you start acting kindly, and feelings of true warmth and caring will eventually follow.

Appendix E

Self-Compassion Scale (SCS)

HOW I TYPICALLY ACT TOWARDS MYSELF IN DIFFICULT TIMES

Please read each statement carefully before answering. For each item, indicate how often you behave in the stated manner, using the following 1-5 scale. Please answer according to what really reflects your experience rather than what you think your experience should be.

Almost never				Almost always
1	2	3	4	5

1. I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies.
2. When I'm feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong.
3. When things are going badly for me, I see the difficulties as part of life that everyone goes through.
4. When I think about my inadequacies, it tends to make me feel more separate and cut off from the rest of the world.
5. I try to be loving towards myself when I'm feeling emotional pain.
6. When I fail at something important to me I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy.
7. When I'm down, I remind myself that there are lots of other people in the world feeling like I am.
8. When times are really difficult, I tend to be tough on myself.
9. When something upsets me I try to keep my emotions in balance.
10. When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people.
11. I'm intolerant and impatient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.
12. When I'm going through a very hard time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need.
13. When I'm feeling down, I tend to feel like most other people are probably happier than I am.
14. When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation.
15. I try to see my failings as part of the human condition
16. When I see aspects of myself that I don't like, I get down on myself.
17. When I fail at something important to me I try to keep things in perspective.
18. When I'm really struggling, I tend to feel like other people must be having an easier time of it.
19. I'm kind to myself when I'm experiencing suffering.
20. When something upsets me I get carried away with my feelings.
21. I can be a bit cold-hearted towards myself when I'm experiencing suffering.
22. When I'm feeling down I try to approach my feelings with curiosity and openness.
23. I'm tolerant of my own flaws and inadequacies.
24. When something painful happens I tend to blow the incident out of proportion.
25. When I fail at something that's important to me, I tend to feel alone in my failure.
26. I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like.

Reference

Neff, K. D. (2003). Development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion. *Self and Identity*, 2, 223-250.

SCORING KEY

Self-Kindness Items: 5, 12, 19, 23, 26
Self-Judgment Items (reverse scored): 1, 8, 11, 16, 21
Common Humanity Items: 3, 7, 10, 15
Isolation Items (reverse scored): 4, 13, 18, 25
Mindfulness Items: 9, 14, 17, 22
Over-identification Items (reverse scored): 2, 6, 20, 24

To reverse score items (1=5, 2=4, 3=3, 4=2, 5=1).

To compute a total self-compassion score, first reverse score the negative subscale items - self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification. Then take the mean of each subscale, and compute a total mean (the average of the six subscale means).

When examining subscale scores, higher scores on the self-judgment, isolation and over-identification scale indicate *less* self-compassion before reverse-coding, and *more* self-compassion after reverse coding. You can choose to report subscale scores with or without reverse-coding, but these three negative subscales must be reverse coded before calculating a total self-compassion score.

Note that the scoring procedures are slightly different than that used in the original scale article (Neff, 2003), in which items were totaled rather than averaged. However, it is easier to interpret the scores of the total mean is used and most researchers currently report total SCS scores on a five-point scale.

NORMS AND SCORE SIGNIFICANCE

There are no clinical norms or scores which indicate that an individual is high or low in self-compassion. Rather, SCS scores are mainly used in a comparative manner to examine outcomes for people scoring higher or lower in self-compassion.

As an ad hoc rubric, however, you can consider scores 1.0-2.49 to be low, between 2.5-3.5 to be moderate, and 3.51-5.0 to be high. When trying to determine whether self-compassion levels are high or low relevant to a particular sample, some researchers use a median split.

SCALE DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDITY

The SCS was developed in a sample of college undergraduates (Neff, 2003a). After identifying 71 items that were easily understood by students using a small pilot sample (n=68), exploratory factor analyses (EFA) were used with a larger sample (n=391) to identify 26 items that loaded best on separate subscales representing the six components of self-compassion. Confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were used to provide support that scale items fit as intended with the proposed a priori theoretical model. An initial CFA found a marginal fit to a higher-order model representing a global factor of self-compassion and six subscale factors. Cross validation using CFA in a second sample (N=232) found adequate fit for a higher-order model. Total SCS scores evidenced good internal reliability (Cronbach's α =.92), as did the six subscales (Cronbach's α ranging from .75 to .81). Test-retest reliability over a three-week interval was also good for the total score (Cronbach's α =.93) and six subscale scores (with Cronbach's α ranging from .80 to .88).

More recently, bifactor Exploratory Structural Equation Modeling (ESEM) has been used to verify the factor structure of the SCS rather than a higher order model, as it is more theoretically appropriate. Neff et al. (2019) used bifactor ESEM to examine the factor structure of the SCS in 20 diverse samples (N = 11,685), and excellent fit was found for a model of one general factor of self-compassion and six specific subscale factors. Moreover, 95% of the reliable variance could be attributed to a general factor. Although there has been debate over whether or not the SCS should be used as a total score or as separate positive and negative scores, empirical evidence tends to support the use of a total score rather than two separate scores (Neff, 2018; Neff, 2020). The factor structure of the SCS has also been found to be culturally invariant across 18 international samples (Tóth-Király & Neff, 2020).

For an in-depth discussion of the psychometric properties of the SCS, see Neff and Tóth-Király (in press).

ANALYTIC APPROACH FOR VALIDATION AND TRANSLATION

In order to validate the factor structure of the scale (including for translations) we strongly recommend the use of bifactor ESEM, as this is the most appropriate method to assess the operation of self-compassion components as a system. Information on this analytic method can be found in (Neff et al., 2019). Moreover, appropriate syntax for how to conduct these analyses for the SCS using Mplus can be found in the online supplement to that article and also here.

Many translations of the SCS already exist can be found here. You are free to create a new translation of the SCS, but we ask that you use bifactor ESEM to validate the scale structure since it is most appropriate.

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